WHERE NEXT FOR KINECT?

DISHONORED
The assassin sim from the minds behind Deus Ex and Half-Life 2

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In giving Batman the tools to tackle an entire cityscape of vividly rendered villainy, Rocksteady is grappling with its most ambitious production to date. The genre-pushing results are showcased on p72

FIGHTING BACK THE MADNESS IN BATMAN: ARKHAM CITY

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KAPOW!

The rebirth of an action hero made for videogames



Between 1986 and 2008, more than 20 games featuring Batman were released across various computer and console formats. It seems like a large amount – far surpassing the number of games released featuring Superman, supposedly the brightest star among DC's superhero roster – until you look a little more closely at the Caped Crusader, and from the perspective of the prospective game designer. As a character on which to base a videogame, Bruce Wayne's alter ego ticks box upon box. He can handle himself in a fight. He's loaded up with gadgetry. He gets about the place via millions of dollars' worth of fanciful vehicles. He's mysterious and misunderstood but also vulnerable and most certainly human. And he has over 70 years of backstory from which to pull inspiration, throwing up some of the most charismatic comic-book adversaries ever conceived. It is a wonder, then, that it took until the stomach punch of 2009's *Arkham Asylum* for Batman's potential to be realised in interactive form.

Yes, Ocean's 8bit isometric-3D *Batman* platform puzzler was cute, and Konami's scrolling beat 'em up treatment was a laugh, but it wasn't until that famous costume was filled out via Epic's muscular Unreal Engine that the hero seemed to really come alive. OK, so Rocksteady's game didn't feature the garage stuffed with vehicles, but it wasn't to the detriment of one of the most enthralling action adventures in recent years.



Even with its broadened scope and significantly larger playing area, follow-up *Arkham City* doesn't concern itself with distractions such as the Batmobile, either. When you consider all of the other elements being fed into this sequel, which promises to outdo the previous game in every respect, perhaps it's just as well that its development team has retained its focus. Our report on the studio's progress begins on p72. It's some journey from its debut game, *Urban Chaos: Riot Response*, which is fondly recalled by many as an overlooked delight. For more forgotten treats, see p82 – and get in touch to let us know your nominations for additions to the list. ■

games

Hype

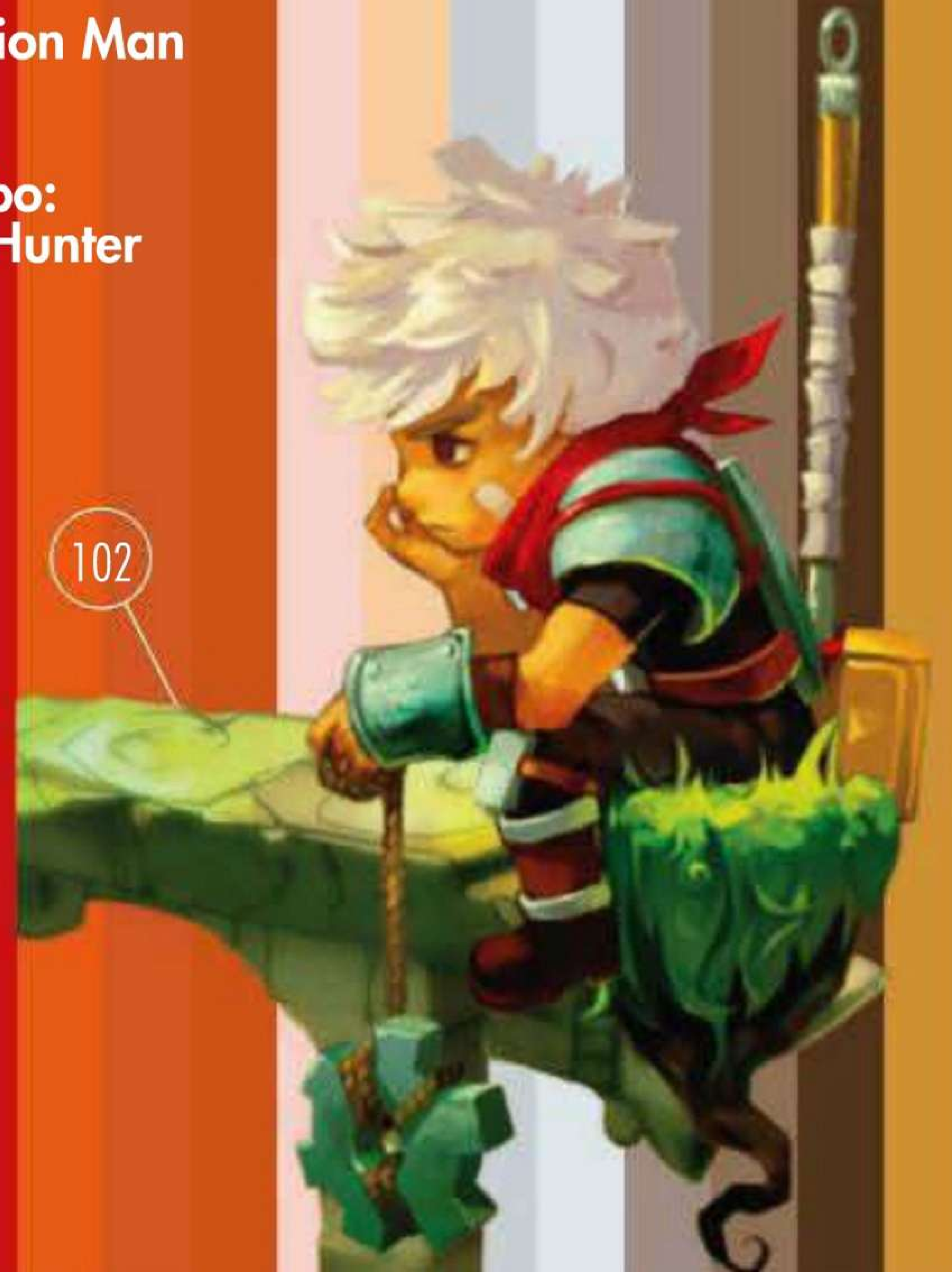
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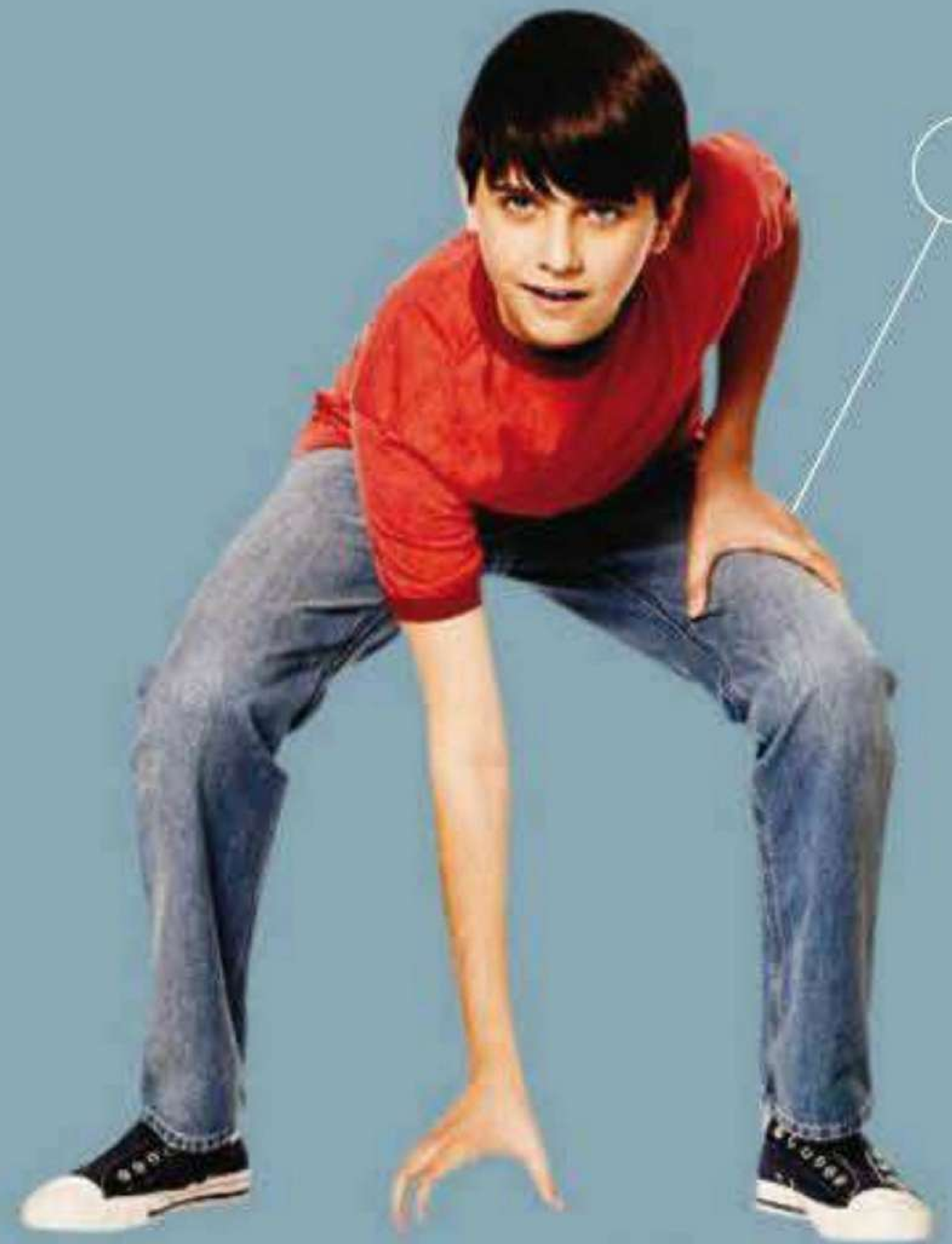
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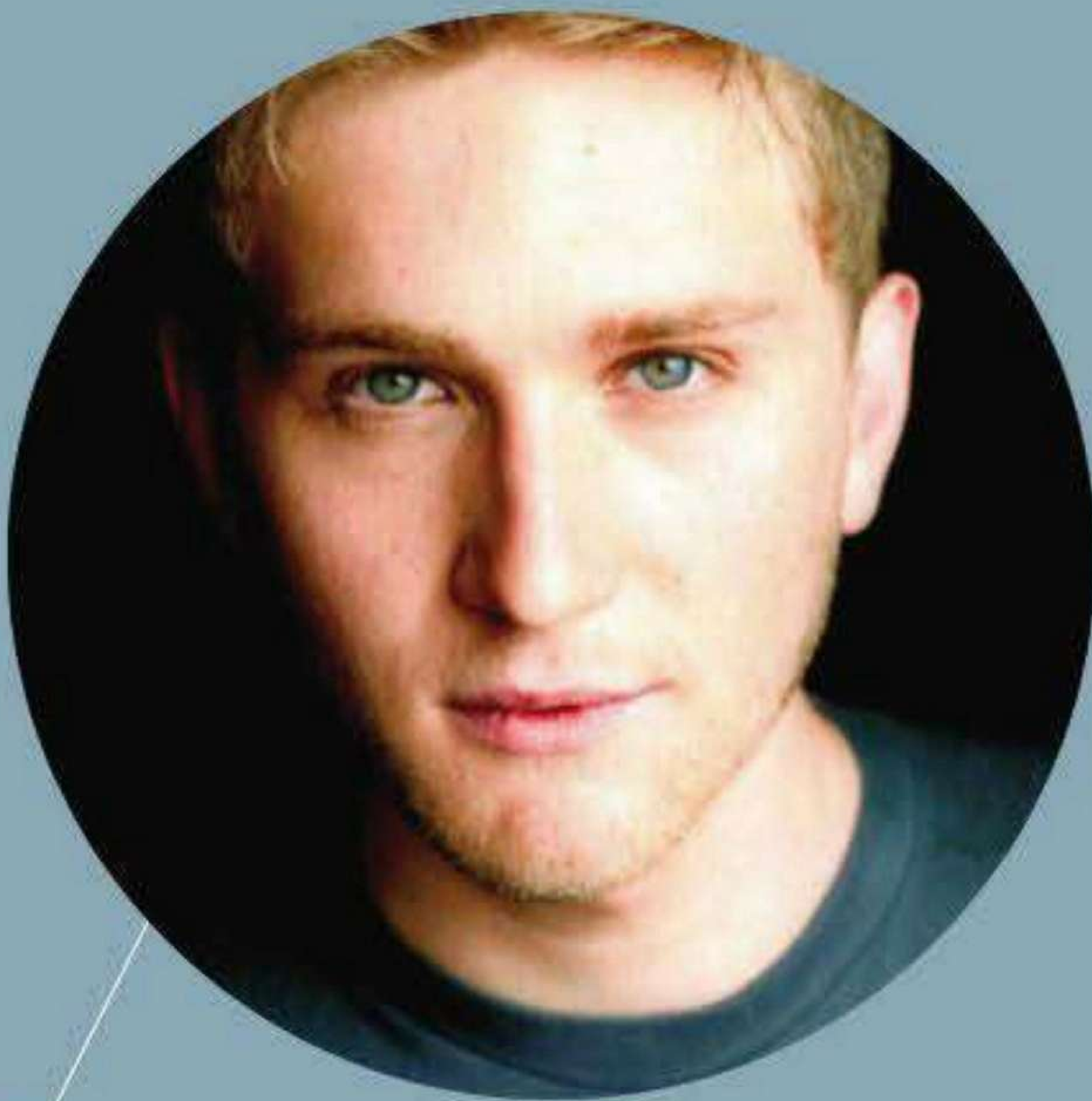
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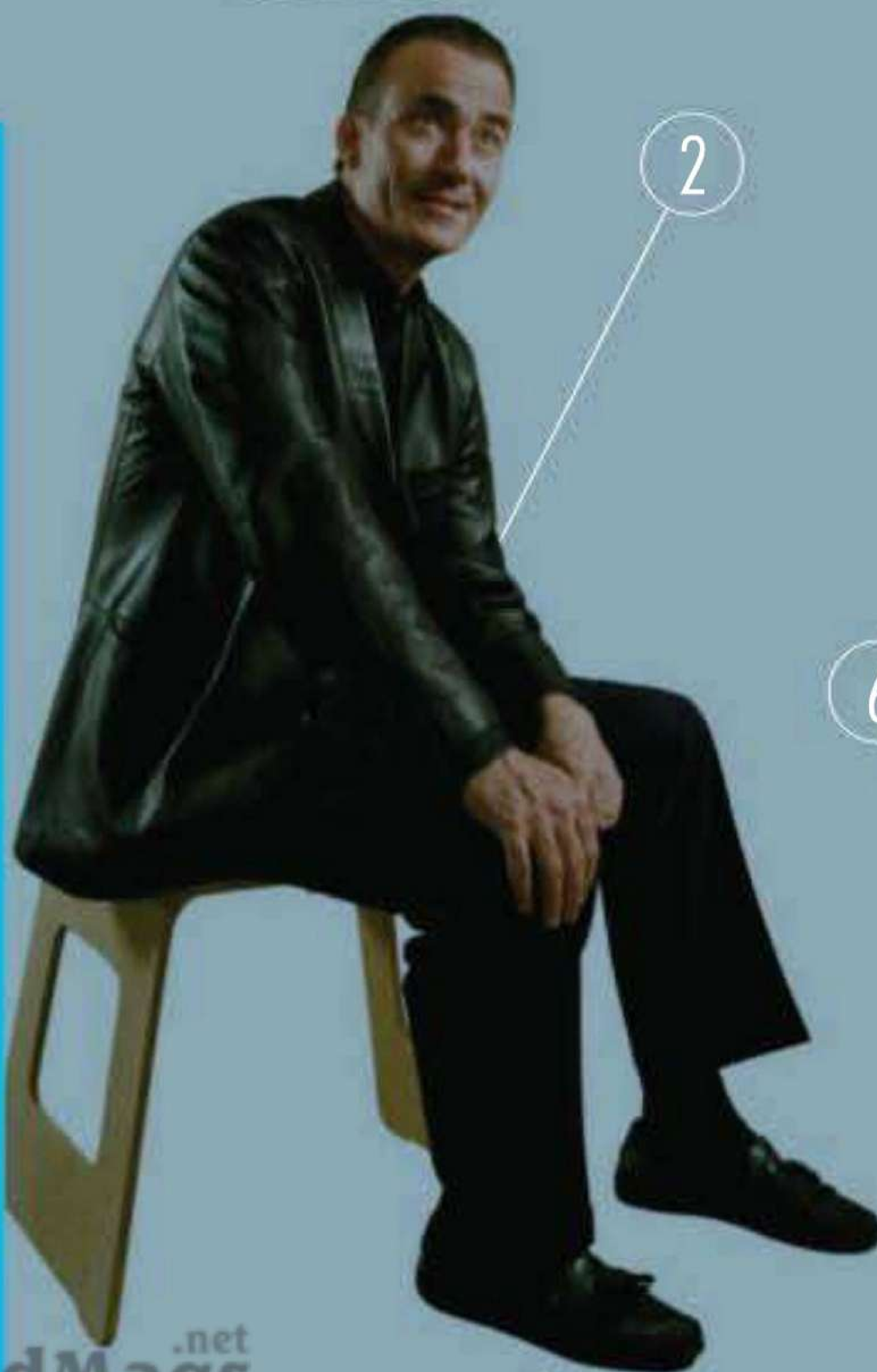
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WLEDGE

Microsoft's motion-sensing peripheral, Kinect (1), was launched to great fanfare last year and claims over ten million sales, but where is it going next? And has it delivered on its promises? We put these questions to creative director Kudo Tsunoda on p10. Trip Hawkins (2) is a man who knows about bringing new hardware to market too, having launched the 3DO. Now, however, he thinks the market is shifting in favour of convenience, and that the humble Web browser is the future of gaming. Read his thoughts on p14. New York's Games For Change conference (3) brought together developers and thinkers to discuss the positive contribution games can make to the world – our report on this lofty ideal begins on p16. Ambition of a different type is shown by Katsuhiro Harada on p18 – he's making a sequel to *Tekken Tag Tournament* (4) more than a decade after the original game's release. And following the devastating effects of the Japanese earthquake and tsunami, on p20 we look at how Sega (5) is trying to bring consumers back to its arcades, despite rolling electricity blackouts. In Soundbytes on p22, faces familiar and otherwise, including Hideo Kojima (6), share their thoughts on the gaming scene, while on p24 the face of *LA Noire*'s Cole Phelps, otherwise known as Mad Men actor Aaron Staton (7), submits to questioning about his favourite game. And we think he's telling the truth.



bit.ly/IM3xIa
Up-to-the-minute game news and views

Looking to Kinect's future

Microsoft's motion-sensing device is in ten million homes, but is it delivering on its promise?

An arms-out flying game in a perfectly modelled recreation of New York. A downloadable Chatroulette-style quick-draw over Xbox Live. Sherlock Holmes. Star Trek, with you controlling everything from the bridge. *Age Of Empires* through Caesar's eyes. A ghost story directed by Suda 51. A firstperson Indiana Jones adventure that mixes *Mirror's Edge* and *Time Crisis. Milo And Kate.*

These were some of the concepts we pondered in **E**218, in which we talked to Microsoft and the developers making the first wave of Kinect titles about the potential of the hardware. And Kinect was a device with potential. A device that could track your movements, and listen to your voice. A device that could see you.

All of which is still true, of course, but so far we're yet to see a game as ambitious or exciting as those we hurriedly dreamed up above, and in fact, the one game on that list that *was* actually in development has since been cancelled. Microsoft has sold over ten million units of its motion-sensing hardware, but it's done so on the back of software which, with one or two exceptions, has felt unexciting and predictable.

Kudo Tsunoda isn't just creative director of Kinect and general manager of Microsoft Game Studios, he's the device's ardent, exuberant spokesperson, having appeared on talk shows and magazine covers in order to spread the gospel of controller-free gaming. He's typically positive about Kinect's future, and dismissive of the suggestion that we're still waiting for the device to deliver on its promises. "I think a great part of what we've done with Kinect is build an experience that, when they see it, makes people go: 'Holy smoke, I really want to check that out and experience that myself,' he argues. "There's always so much discussion about core gamers, family gamers, this and that. But Kinect is really a social experience that brings people together."

> "In the beginning we focused on the people actually playing, but Kinect includes everyone in the room"

This is a theme to which Tsunoda frequently returns – success defined through widening of demographics and changing the nature of play rather than by focusing on specific pieces of software – and his excitement at the prospect of bringing new users to gaming is obviously sincere. Nonetheless, he is frank about some of the lessons learnt from having Kinect in the wild, and how they have affected the design process. "What we've found probably isn't natural is when you give people a long, learned list of gestures to make which trigger specific actions, where you need to do this one specific thing with your body that the game tells you to do," he explains, arguing that successful Kinect controls replicate familiar actions, or anticipate the way players will behave, rather than telling them specifically how to.

He also believes that the way groups of people interact with Kinect requires a tailored approach to design. "In the beginning we focused on the people actually playing, which would make sense… but Kinect includes everyone in the room," he argues. "You see people participating verbally even though they're not in the game, telling people what to do. Something that we've been looking to design into the experiences a lot more is how to take the people who are watching the main players playing and make them more of a fundamental part of the experience. We can leverage things like the voice capabilities of Kinect to include those people in an active way."

Tsunoda's vision of Kinect as a primarily social device is just one of the meanings hidden in the sensor's hybrid name, but is perhaps the most defining. Kinect might not always work perfectly, but the absence of a controller makes its games unintimidating and inviting. But, he argues, Kinect may yet revolutionise gaming in at least one other respect.

"[Something] we struggled with in the game industry for a long time is building an emotional connection between the person playing and the characters inside the games," he says. "With Kinect, [you are] able to talk to characters inside of games, and experience not just voice recognition but them being able to understand the tone of your voice and how you're saying things, and being

Kinect holds the record for fastest-selling consumer electronics device, having shifted 8m units in 60 days



Tsunoda on Kinect's effect on players: "I wasn't really able to be a good dancer before, and I played a bunch of *Dance Central* and it really helped to teach me some dancing skills"

WHO'S BUYING?
When asked about the demographics of Kinect users, Tsunoda tells us he sees it as a success: "Out of all the Xbox and Kinect bundles sold since launch, the majority of them have been bought by people as their first Xbox purchase. So we've really been happy that the creative stuff that we've been doing within entertainment, and how we build things differently, at least has been resonating with customers. They've been having a good time with the entertainment, and I think that has been awesome."



bit.ly/q3V2BP
Extensive Kudo Tsunoda interview



RISE OF NIGHTMARES

Sega's survival horror title is making a lunge for the core gamer market, with a Hostel-esque narrative (players take the role of a man seeking to rescue his wife from a deranged scientist) setting up a game that seems, superficially at least, like *The House Of The Dead* with motion-controlled melee weapons. *Nightmares*' control system offers a robust enough approach to Kinect navigation – hold a foot a step in front of you to move constantly forwards, place it a step behind to move back, and turn by twisting your torso left or right – albeit one that seems particularly suited to negotiating this dungeon's obligingly straight corridors with occasional turns, and one that struggles with fine adjustments. Combat promises a variety of weapons – from lead pipes to chainsaws – alongside a grisly dismemberment mechanic, but it'll take extended play to tell if *Rise Of Nightmares* can offer more than gory novelty.

Publisher Sega **Developer** Sega AM1 **Release** September



THE GUNSTRINGER

Twisted Pixel's Wild West shooter is built around one of the more astute Kinect control schemes so far conceived. You don't control the gunslinging marionette directly; instead you're merely pulling at his strings as he navigates a world built around this puppetry conceit – a human hand drops in enemy reinforcements, and cutscenes reveal a live-action audience watching the 'show'. It works best in the on-rails sections, in which you move your left hand to the left or right to avoid obstacles, and use your right to paint up to six targets before firing by miming a gun. Cover-based sections are more awkward – in theory offering slightly more tactical gunplay, but in practice undermined by the need to pop smoothly in and out of cover – and where Kinect's usually un-troublesome lag (or perhaps simply the vagueness of the string-pulling motion) becomes noticeable.

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** Twisted Pixel Games **Release** Q4



Kudo Tsunoda, creative director of Kinect at Microsoft

able to see your body language and incorporating that into relationships. I think with the launch game *Kinectimals* you're starting to see a type of human-to-digital character relationship that can be built using Kinect. I think Kinect technology allows us to build stories and storytelling in a way that is more user-driven, that hasn't been done before."

It's hard to disagree that player-NPC interaction offers some of Kinect's most untapped potential. But it makes the conflicting reports surrounding the cancellation of Lionhead's game (or tech demo, depending upon who you ask) *Milo And Kate* all the more perplexing. And while Lionhead has suggested that *Fable: The Journey* will utilise Milo's emotion recognition technology, precious few other upcoming Kinect games seem to be prioritising NPC interaction. When we ask Tsunoda when he thinks such games are going to emerge, he's characteristically confident. "That's going to be coming soon," he says.

> "People are using Kinect in ways that we couldn't even have anticipated when we launched the thing"

So where does hope for Kinect lie? It's a device with a vibrant modding scene which, Tsunoda acknowledges, even took its creators off-guard. "People are using Kinect in ways that we couldn't even have anticipated when we launched the thing," he claims. "There's so much going on with Kinect being involved in medical fields, for robots, all these different things." Some of this experimental spirit has wormed its way into Microsoft's own software – with enjoyable gimmick kit Kinect Fun Labs showing off some of the device's underexplored functions, letting players create googly-eyed buddies out of household objects, for instance, or transform themselves into a bobbleheaded figurine.

But these are toys and functions, not fully fledged games. And for a piece of hardware released on the back of promises of revolutionising gaming, it's concerning that two of the high points of its Christmas lineup for this year, *Dance Central 2* and *Kinect Sports: Season Two*, are also two of its first sequels. Tsunoda is keen to stress that Kinect is a constantly evolving piece of hardware. "Since launch we've added things like being able to make an avatar that looks just like you, just by standing in front of the sensor, or object capture technology, finger tracking, head tracking for experiences like *Forza*," he explains, but he also acknowledges the challenge facing those designing for the system: "The really big push is not just to continue to make Kinect games as they were – Kinect experiences in the way that people think of the platform that we shipped last November – but to continue to use the technology to make amazing things."

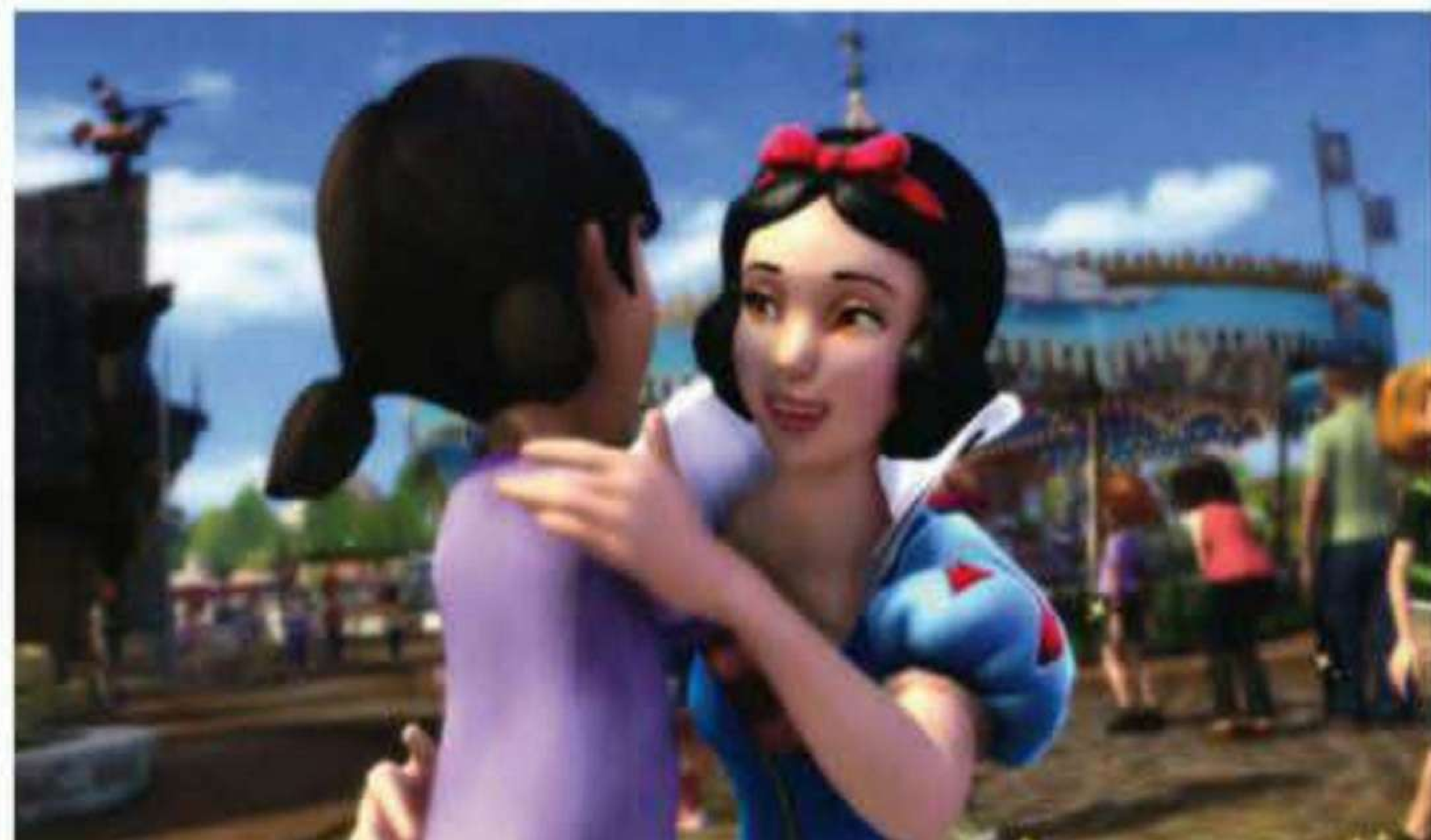
Kinect still has potential. It's time for its games to demonstrate just how much. ■



KINECT STAR WARS

After it deftly raised, then dashed, the hopes of what should have been a sympathetic audience at E3, *Kinect Star Wars* has a lot to prove. Unfortunately, experiencing that demo firsthand offers little in the way of reassurance. There's a short-lived flicker of excitement in slashing droids in two with a swipe of your right hand, and using Force powers with your left remains thrilling for a few desperate flickers longer, but *Kinect Star Wars*' ridiculous approach to navigation makes the farce strong with this one. Your Jedi's primary method of movement is a dash instigated by leaning forward – which means you whizz around open arenas in order to slash small clusters of politely spaced droids apart. The overall feeling – in a demo not three minutes long – is wearisome and methodical, with controls lacking any of precision or subtlety necessary for players to capture that iconic Jedi grace.

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** LucasArts/Terminal Reality **Release** December



DISNEYLAND ADVENTURES

Billed by **David Braben** as "Kinect's first open-world game", *Disneyland Adventures* turns Walt Disney's fibreglass wonderland into open-ended hub, with iconic rides as minigames. Exploring the park – which has been accurately modelled on the California original – is done by pointing in the direction you wish to travel to and letting your child avatar head there. It's a straightforward approach to navigation that offers no issues in the wide-open locations we explored. The rides, meanwhile, seem a more conventional set of jumping, dodging and collection-based Kinect minigames – recalling the first game for the system with 'Adventures' in the title. But that game didn't have the Disney licence. With a graphical engine more than capable of mimicking the animation of a host of classic films, *Disneyland Adventures* makes swordfighting with a spot-on recreation of Captain Hook a possibility.

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** Frontier Developments **Release** TBC



DANCE CENTRAL 2

Dance Central was the jewel of Kinect's launch lineup, taking a genre that had hitherto been played out to partial success with dance mats and motion controllers and making it work with neither. *Dance Central 2* is by any measurement a conservative sequel, its major selling point being the simultaneous twoplayer mode that really should have been in the first game. However, the routine-teaching Break It Down mode has been improved – giving players voice command over the speed of the tutorials and letting them practise individual moves as well as whole routines. The ability to import songs from the first game, meanwhile, will complement what we hope is a cheesier tracklist than the overly contemporary previous offering. The inclusion of Bananarama's Venus alongside the more expected likes of Usher and Rhianna is a good start.

Publisher EA **Developer** Harmonix **Release** October



KINECT SPORTS: SEASON TWO

The brand-new set of games featured in *Season Two* – skiing, baseball, golf, darts, tennis and American football – mean that Rare's second *Kinect Sports* gets away with its rather rapid turnaround, and also has a chance to tackle some of the *Wii Sports* classics we suspect were deliberately avoided first time around. While darts will be the real test of *Season Two*'s precision, golf seems surprisingly accurate but, in order to avoid accidental whacking of the ball, involves some slightly contrived gestures – you raise your hand to take practice shots rather than merely stepping away from the tee. American football, meanwhile, should be realistically opaque for those not already familiar with the sport, offering players the requisite four plays to score and requiring them to select from a list of strategies at the beginning of each play.

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** Rare, Big Park **Release** November

Browser's inside story

Digital Chocolate CEO Trip Hawkins on why the game industry will eventually live in your Web browser

At June's Gamelab conference in Barcelona, **Trip Hawkins** – CEO of mobile-game developer Digital Chocolate and founder of EA way back in 1982 – delivered a talk entitled 'The Browser Will Win'. It could just have easily been called 'Why I Fled the Traditional Console-Based Game Business Like It Was A Foundering Cruise Liner'. In his talk, Hawkins discussed the numerous ways in which the Internet has bred new consumer values – namely, a tendency to prize convenience over technical quality. He also held up Sony as a cautionary tale, having built its game business around achieving the best performance – a lucrative strategy during the PS2 hardware generation but one that has become a liability.

Time, then, to talk with Hawkins in more depth about this core shift in the game industry.

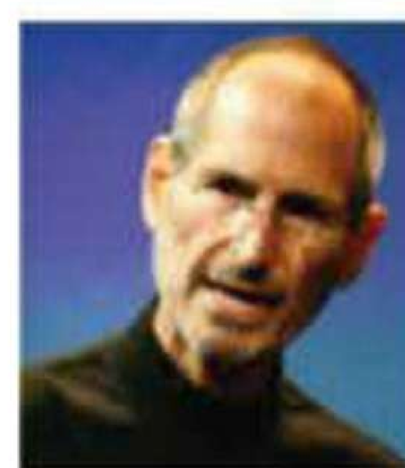
When did you first pick up on the market shift?
I have four children, which has basically been market research in how convenience affects gaming habits. Four years ago, my teenage son spent every minute playing hardcore games on consoles. Within two years he was only using the console to play *Guitar Hero* or *Wii Sports*. He cared more about the social aspect of it. He was busy enough that he didn't have time for the hardcore games that demand so many hours to be good at. And then now, two more years have gone by and he's not using the consoles at all – everything's done on the iPhone and everything's on his laptop in the browser. So he's made that journey from age 11 to 15. For me, that took decades to go through life stages.

Just how persuasive is convenience?
It's a very powerful thing and a bit shocking. I think a lot of people in the game industry are in disbelief, because we're so accustomed to making high-performance games, and having customers that we think are very needy about that. But the reality is that only a certain number of people want to know how to fly an airplane, but everybody would like to be a passenger.

So how do social games appeal to both hardcore players defecting from consoles and newly minted gamers?
It all comes down to the idea that, as a player, I want to engage with other people, so it has to be at their level too. Now, I may play it more dependently, I may spend more hours and more money, I may extract more satisfaction from perfecting the gameplay. But I still need to be able to use these games to engage with people who might not be as proficient as me.

> "If you want to be more successful, you have to take a more open, democratic cross-platform stance"

A good example of this is fantasy sports. Some people are really hardcore about it – they spend hours and hours studying the information and making sure that they're smart about what player to have, what trades to make. And then there's other players that just enjoy the social side of it and are less bothered about how they play. So that's why – whether you look at Facebook, iPhone or the browser – the games that are popular involve simulation, resource management, roleplaying. They involve elements where the fully engaged gamer can fully use their brain and immerse themselves. It's just not happening at a pace to scare others off.



HAWKINS ON STEVE JOBS
"There are a lot of psycho-fans surrounding him, and a lot of people that want to work at Apple because they want to be part of it. The irony is that they're like the audience in 1984. They want to be close to the power and associated with the success, but many of them refuse to challenge Steve.
"I had a twisted relationship with Steve because I challenged him all the time. He needed that and he knew he needed it, but he hated it and he didn't want to promote me or give me any political power. He drove me out of the company partly for that reason. I stayed longer at Apple than I expected, but I always planned to start my own games company – but he was very mad when I left, and he's still mad. Not that he would ever admit it."



bit.ly/rjRP5Z
More from Trip Hawkins on gaming's future

You talk a lot about the freedom developers enjoy working in social and mobile game development, but aren't they simply beholden to new masters – Apple and Facebook, for example? It's not uncommon to hear developers who make games for iOS complain about being at the whims of Steve Jobs.
Steve used to be my boss when I worked at Apple, so I know him well. And I think it would be a incredibly positive thing for the industry if Apple decided to support all of the Web standards, because then Apple could be the best about everything. But right now they make a conscious choice. They want you to be in the App Store rather than the browser, so they cripple the browser. They've created this outlet and they had to have an excuse to keep you there, so they're like: "Oh, it's nothing against Flash; we just prefer HTML5". Well, Flash can actually make a really good game, and with HTML5 you can't do that. But give HTML5 another few years to mature, and that could solve the problem. Or Apple could be more generous about deciding to support more de facto standards like Flash, or at least let it run its course.

I think that if you really love a platform – it could be Apple, it could be Nintendo, it could be Facebook – if you really love a platform, and you're really good at making things that are a perfect fit with the native programming requirements of that platform, then it's OK to be on that platform and roll with the punches. You just have to get good at what that platform's about, then you can survive on that platform. But if you want to be more successful, you have to be on more platforms, and you have to take a more open, democratic cross-platform stance. That's where the browser's going to be. ■



Hawkins left Apple in 1982 to found EA. In 1991 he started 3DO, and after that venture's bankruptcy in 2003 founded developer Digital Chocolate

3am/Winni Wintermeyer

World of good

The 2011 Games For Change Conference wrestles with how games can make a difference



At the Games For Change conference in New York City, hypothetical questions fill the air. Thousands of students, teachers and industry experts – as well as a handful of dignitaries, including one former US vice president – are gathered to discuss how videogames can change the world. The three-day conference in June is packed full of seminars and hands-on sessions, but some common themes resonate throughout:

Does a game have to be fun?
'Gamification' is one of the most prominent buzzwords at Games For Change, and for good reason – presenters and attendees are all fascinated by the idea that game concepts like points and levels can be applied to just about anything. But one common complaint of gamification is that it rips the fun out of gaming – when you turn a game into a series of numeric systems, it kind of loses its charm. Is that charm really necessary, though?

Asi Burak, a designer at Impact Games and one of the festival's co-presidents, isn't sure: "I don't think 'fun' is exactly how I'd describe [*LA Noire*]," he says, pointing out that Rockstar's detective game is more about experiencing the story and environment than individual moments of 'fun'. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, in his opinion. A game can be entertaining without being fun if it manages to evoke emotions or create an interesting experience. "Can [meaningful games] combine a message with entertainment the same way a non-fiction book or documentary would do it?" Burak asks.

"Can meaningful games combine a message with entertainment in the same way as a documentary?"

Are entertainment and education mutually exclusive?
Absolutely not, says Valve MD **Gabe Newell**, who delivered a speech at the show. "There tends to be distinction between games that are good for education and games that are commercially successful," Newell says. "And I'm not sure I buy into that."

Newell points to his company's *Portal 2*, which was both critically and commercially successful, as an example of this balance. Though you don't think about it while playing the puzzle game, *Portal 2* is one big physics lesson, teaching you the principles of acceleration and velocity while keeping you enthralled. Valve is even working with schools to build curriculums around the game, Newell says.

He also referenced classic history simulation franchise *Civilization*, which manages to both entertain and educate players with its choose-your-own-adventure version of world history. You might not realise you're learning, but you'll walk away from those sleepless *Civilization* marathons with plenty of new historical knowledge to show off.



Can anything bridge the 'casual/hardcore gap'?
It seems difficult, doesn't it? Your average *Bejeweled* fan probably doesn't play much *Call Of Duty*, while more hardcore gamers tend to scorn the throng of *FarmVille* fans that inhabit their Facebook news feeds.

The solution, Burak says, might be shying away from mindless games like *FarmVille*: "When I look at a game, I want to have meaningful choices," he says. "With *FarmVille*, I don't think I'm making meaningful choices."





Top: Chris Swain, CEO and co-founder of game developer Talkie. Above: Asi Burak, the game developer and former Israeli intelligence operative we featured in E214

Though Burak says he thinks *FarmVille* creator Zynga is doing great things for the industry – such as allowing donations to charity through its games – he doesn't see titles like *FarmVille* appealing to the hardcore any time soon. Still, Facebook might be the industry's future in many ways.

"Right now Facebook is the mass medium for games," **Chris Swain**, CEO of game studio Talkie, tells us. "We don't have another example [of a medium] with such a broad audience."

Because of that, Swain says, Facebook could be the most important tool for effecting change. Though he thinks socially significant, meaningful games will eventually make their way to

Associated Press

home consoles, Facebook's demographic is unbeatable. "As designers, we're typically focusing on nine to ten per cent of the world's population," Burak says. "There's 90 per cent of the world who live on less than $10 a day, who have less access than us. Sometimes they need our projects more than anyone else."

Will we ever see a 3D, immersive, non-fiction game? Or, to be more candid, will anybody ever finance one?

"We're still waiting to see that 3D, immersive game that is not fiction, that competes with a *Grand Theft Auto* level of craft," Burak says. "We have to prove ourselves… the more people we convince, the more sponsors we get, the more budgets will get larger."

For now, there are other options. Burak says showing young people how to design their own games, for example, is "incredibly beneficial" for kids, teaching them systemic thinking, problem-solving and collaboration. Other, low-budget games such as strategy simulator *Fate Of The World* can spread significant ideas about issues like climate change and political balance. Burak hopes we'll soon start seeing meaningful games on shelves. "It's tough because of the layers," he says. "It needs to be compelling, it needs to make sense, it needs to teach. Most importantly, you need people with the craft, the talent to do this."

And what if we do start seeing the triple-A game equivalent of non-fiction books or documentaries, titles that teach us and guide us, earning distinguished spots on our shelves alongside *Final Fantasy* and *Halo*? Then maybe we can do a little more to change the world. ■

SHOCK & GORE
Al Gore (pictured) kicked off the event with a passionate keynote speech, proclaiming that "games have clearly arrived as a mass medium" and praising industry execs such as Bing Gordon and Will Wright for their work. Gore confessed to being unfamiliar with games in general, but cited Facebook and Apple as two driving forces behind today's industry, crediting both companies with the "explosion of interest" in gaming over the past few years.

Tagging rights

It's been more than a decade since Tekken Tag Tournament, but now the oddball beat 'em up is finally getting a sequel

While – as big franchise crossovers tend to do – *Street Fighter X Tekken* has diverted some attention from ongoing developments in either of its parent series, it's *Tekken Tag Tournament 2* which is Namco's major arcade fighting release this year. We talk with series producer **Katsuhiro Harada** about the long wait for the sequel.

Why have you decided to make a sequel to *Tekken Tag Tournament* now, after over a decade?
We wanted to do it much sooner; we talked about it when we were about to make *Tekken 6*. The pressure was such that we had to go for *6* and put any ideas of *Tag 2* aside. In a way, the first *Tag* came to crown our achievement with what you could describe as the first generation of *Tekken*; to bring the franchise to the next step, we needed the next generation of hardware. This came with the PS2 and the PS3. The fact is when we finished *Tekken 6 Bloodline Rebellion* and were thinking about our next step, most of the people around me were pushing for *Tag 2*.

"Americans are quite good at Street Fighter, while Europeans are better at Tekken"

Why have you decided to separate *Tag* from the other *Tekken* games?
You may find this strange, but people often react based on a rhythm; you get used to something which becomes natural to you. In a fighting game, I would describe this as the way you chain moves. *Tekken* is basically a versus game that opposes two combatants, but if you add a tag experience on the top of that, users may lose focus because we are talking about two different things. When you say 'tag tournament', you immediately understand what it is about. The rules are crystal clear, and your brain easily switches. And from a developer point of view, it's also easier to focus, because you are not trying to do too many things at the same time, you have a greater chance to make a better experience. Actually, I believe you do a better job. So it is less a commercial issue but really a creative one: to separate the two experiences.

You've remodelled the characters for *Tag 2*. How did you do that without compromising their personalities?
You have no idea how difficult it was and still is! I'm still hesitant. In the west, photorealism is the standard and the latest games show how close [western developers] are now to achieving it. *Tekken* is not about that. On the other hand, take a game like *Street Fighter* or *Guilty Gear*. Their charisma comes from the art style and their anime-looking motions. But what is *Tekken* about? Well, this is a very tough question as there is no real answer. It's a mix of CG with a very Japanese way of designing characters. So, changing the models, bringing them to the next stage, is a very difficult process and one that should not hurt the fans. We made new sets of shaders with the use of normal maps. The quality of the character models looks very improved, but I'm sure there will be people who won't like our current approach. We're still working on those models, so the final version may offer either a little more realism or a stronger anime touch. We can't tell yet.



Katsuhiro Harada, producer of the *Tekken* series



The popularity of fighting games in the arcade has dwindled – why do you think that is?
To a certain degree, I think there was a fighting game boom. The PlayStation was certainly a big factor in this. In a short period of time we were flooded with tons of 2D and 3D fighting games, and *Street Fighter* went silent for about a decade. During that time, *Virtua Fighter* and *Tekken* kept releasing [versions] in the arcade. I was talking with Ono-san of Capcom the other day about *Street Fighter*, and how the franchise reached its peak with *SFIII*; the team had done everything possible with the franchise by that time. It had tons of systems, but this was a barrier to potential newcomers. It was like sport: it's cool to watch, but you stand no chance against the pros.

Is that why *Tekken X Street Fighter* became possible?
The crazy thing about *Street Fighter* is that as soon as it came back on the fighting stage, people started to say that the boom was back. I realised how much power was in that franchise. Americans are quite good at *Street Fighter* while Europeans are better at *Tekken*. This was very exciting ground for opposing both on a common stage. In addition, there were much talk in the past about mixing franchises. There was *Capcom VS SNK* already, but I was told that doing such a thing is a last resort because as soon as the buzz is gone, it's pretty much over. As soon as we started to talk about *Tekken X Street Fighter*, people were immediately excited, so I guess it was the right move. ■



A King and Armor King combo (above) should bring a wide range of grapples and some good counterattack options, but the twosome's weak low attacks can be a problem for some players







The only new character confirmed so far for the game is female wrestler Jaycee (below far left) – although Harada has confirmed that she is simply Julia Chang in a lucha mask



AGEING GRACEFULLY

Why Heihachi is suddenly getting much younger



One character who seems to have unequivocally benefitted from the new character models is longstanding series villain Heihachi Mishima, who's looking noticeably more sprightly in *Tekken Tag Tournament 2*. "As you may know," Harada explains, "the voice actor for this character died. He was one of the longest-standing characters in game, and we thought the circumstance gave us the opportunity to change him. We've managed to explain this fact very well, almost magically. Basically, he drank a potion that made him younger! You might say: 'What the hell!?' But we're just like that!"

Survivor's story

How Sega's arcade divisions are pressing continue following the natural disasters that hit Japan this year





Despite leaning to the casino market, Sega's R&D facilities are continuing to work on traditional arcade game attractions, and are lining up new games for the JAMMA event in September

It's an understatement to say that the earthquake, tsunami and the near-catastrophic destabilisation of a nuclear power plant had a huge impact on every aspect of Japanese daily life. Japan's industries took hits in their own ways, and the world of entertainment was no exception. Arcade gaming, in particular, felt the impact strongly, with each major player suffering its share of damage.

Around 18 of Sega's arcades were affected, but the company managed to bring them back to life with startling speed. In the end, only two sites could not be recovered: one suffering perilous structural weaknesses, and another located in the exclusion zone near the Fukushima nuclear plant. Thankfully, no one was hurt on the company's watch.

If it sounds like a relatively pain-free outcome, it's the aftermath of the disaster that may be the real beginning of problems within Japan's arcade scene. Of primary concern are the electricity cuts which arrive as a by-product of an already hot, humid summer season. It was encouraging, therefore, to see Sega unveil forward-thinking, energy-saving tech at its summer Private Show in Tokyo this year. LED-based attractions were out in force, showing a company adapting to the times with energy-efficient alternatives to traditional production methods.

The arcade machines on show reflected Sega's more general target audience. Horse and boat racing titles alongside casino games made it evident that core gamers aren't the only ones invited to Sega's party this year.

One of the Japan disaster's biggest effects on Sega, it seems, has been to transform the company's outlook and approach. A reminder that the best strategy for going through hell really is to keep going.







Sega's show was big on casino-style titles such as *Star Horse 3* (top), *WCCF 10-11* (above) and *Star Boat* (below), although it also made some room for *Border Break Airburst 2.5* (left)









Bethesda Games for Windows XBOX 360 XBOX LIVE



PS3 PlayStation Network



Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"Miyamoto-san has been complaining that without anything to get stuck on, games **don't stick with you as memories."**

Zelda mastermind **Eiji Aonuma** reveals why Nintendo developers are being encouraged to make their games more challenging again



Clara Molden, Camera Press,

"When children need to solve equations in order to get more ammo to shoot the aliens, it is amazing how quickly they can learn."

Schoolboys quiver at the latest idea from **Michael Gove**, UK secretary of state for education



"I don't want another job in the game industry because of my experience [at Team Bondi]. Most of the [artists] I know who worked there **never want to work in games again."**

An **anonymous developer** laments the making of *LA Noire* at Team Bondi



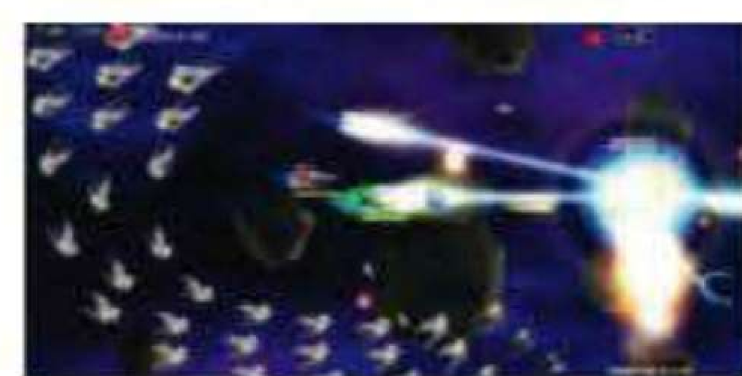
"This technology, regarding facial expressions… will change the direction of adventure games."

Metal Gear maestro **Hideo Kojima** hails the other side of *LA Noire* story, its MotionScan tech

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene





Game Darius Burst: Another Chronicle
Manufacturer Taito

The fourth sequel to 1986's *Darius* is hitting UK arcades – and its unusual cabinet design means that it'll be hard to miss. *Darius Burst Another: Chronicle* (see **E**224) has been out in Japan since last year, but its international release sees changes to its presentation. The cabinet is fundamentally two of Taito's VEWLIX cabs married together with artwork that pays homage to the original '80s *Darius* cabinet design.

The Taito Type X²-powered machine seats four players, with a super-wide screen that links two 32-inch LCD displays. Also on offer are headphone sockets to allow players to soak up the soundtrack more effectively.

The modern hardware brings sparkling visuals to the original *Darius* gameplay, and while the game can be played in a classic mode starting from the first level, a new Chronicle mode brings more of a storyline to the blasting. One aspect of the Japanese release that will not be making it to international arcades, sadly, is Taito's Net Entry System, which ranks players scores and allows them to download extra levels.



My Favourite Game
Aaron Staton

The Mad Men star recalls Call Of Duty sessions on set – and admits that his detective skills leave something to be desired

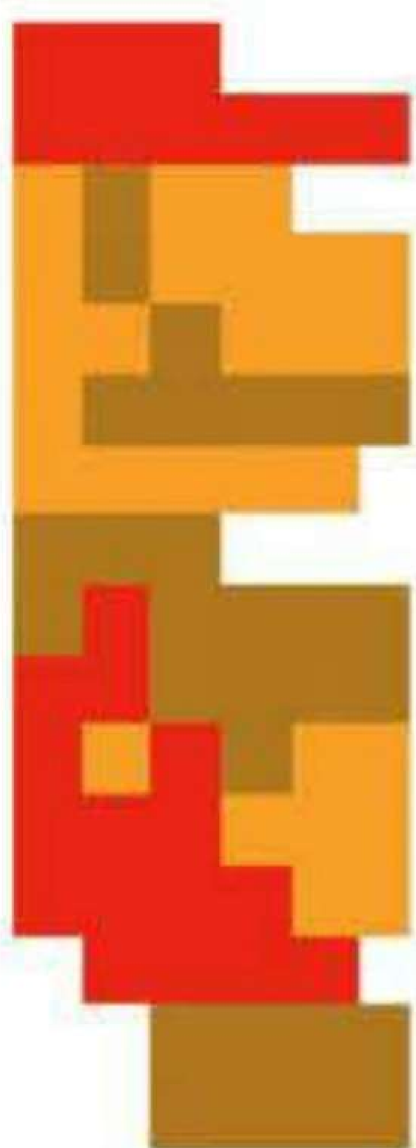
Aaron Staton will have come to most people's attention via the AMC TV series Mad Men, but more recently the 31-year-old actor has become the face – quite literally – of Depth Analysis' MotionScan technology, playing troubled detective Cole Phelps in Team Bondi's groundbreaking crime thriller *LA Noire*. When he's not starring in games, he's a keen consumer of them…

STATON STATS
In Mad Men, which starts filming for its fifth season this month, Staton plays advertising account executive and aspiring author Ken Cosgrove. The series has won 13 Emmys and four Golden Globes. An alumnus of the Carnegie Mellon School of Drama, Staton has also appeared in TV shows such as Without A Trace, and movie The Nanny Diaries alongside Scarlet Johansson.

What's your earliest gaming memory?
I grew up gaming. I had a console in my room when I was five or six – an Atari 2600. And then I had a Nintendo, then a Sega Genesis, which I had for a while, even through the PlayStation generation. I was late on that bandwagon – I got the PlayStation in '99, or something. Then I took a break, and it's been Xbox for me since!

Have any gaming groups formed among the Mad Men cast?
Yeah, actually! Rich Sommer, who plays Harry on the show, Michael Glottis, who plays Paul, and I would play quite a bit of *Call Of Duty*. Rich got a travel bag for his Xbox – he'd bring it to set and we'd all bring a controller [laughs].

***LA Noire* has proved popular with wives and girlfriends, which doesn't happen with too many modern games.**
I made it to the first two cases on the homicide desk. If I play with my wife then the interrogations go *much* smoother than if I play on my own; I am officially the *worst* interrogator [laughs]. But I'd heard that from a couple of other friends: they found their partners, girlfriends and wives were better at picking up the clues. I don't know if it's women's intuition or something else, but I think it definitely has something to do with it!



Is it odd to take control of yourself in a game? And how did your family and friends respond?
I think everybody got kind of a kick out of it. When watching myself in something that I've done for film or TV, there's not that delay – I realise that it's me immediately. So that oddness that you're referring to is more immediate. But having said that, once I put the game into my console at home and I played it for longer than five minutes, the distraction went away and then it did become odd!

"If I play LA Noire with my wife then the interrogations go much smoother. I am officially the worst interrogator"

It must be a good feeling.
There are good feelings attached to many levels of it. Looking back now, 20 years after *Sonic*, we see where that's led, so 20 years after *LA Noire* we'll see where this technology and this style of gaming leads. But what's exciting is to be attached to the lead role of this technology-advancing game – this is some people's early experience in the way that I look back on *Sonic* and *Super Mario Bros*.

Were there any similarities to performing for a TV show or film?
No, it was very different. I was given a 2,200-page script the day before we started – everything was very last minute, it was all finalised one day before! The actual performance aspect was completely different because there were two parts to it – the motion capture and the MotionScanning. Both elements are almost the reverse of one another and new to everyone involved.

Are you happy with the results?
Absolutely. I didn't have a frame of reference, hadn't been able to read the full script, and hadn't worked on a videogame before. And no one involved had been a part of this process or incorporated it into a game. There'd been test footage and they'd been developing the story and world for six years, so they were well versed in the world of *LA Noire*.

Would you like to do more games?
It's hard to say if I'll be able to be a part of any games in the immediate future. It was a great experience and the overall product is very exciting, so absolutely – if the timing worked out, I'd love to do it. It's just a matter of making those things work because as actors we have very little control over when things film.

So, of the games you've played since you were six, which is your favourite?
I think I'm going to have to go with *Super Mario Bros*. While it's probably not the game I've played most in my life, it's a game I remember so vividly and I think I'll always be able to pick up and play for five or ten minutes here and there. ■

Staton's next movie sees him alongside Oscar winner Melissa Leo in Lost Revolution, out later this year



bit.ly/qelZqs
More gaming discussion with Aaron Staton

WEB SITE

OMG Barry
omgbarry.tumblr.com

Primarily celebrating UK game advert design from 1981 to 1991, OMG Barry is bursting with magazine scans you've either never seen before or just won't be able to find anywhere outside of an attic.

The site serves as a valuable retrospective on UK advertising, a golden age for hand-drawn designs; a snapshot of a time when promotional campaigns were led by big ideas rather than bullet points and Photoshop. Conversely, it's also a place to visit for a good old laugh. From the laser-eyed panther in ads for Cub monitors to the kitsch-cool of something like Infogrames' *Hostages*, there's something here for every child (or man-child) of the '80s and fan of retro game art. And it's all laid out against the backdrop of a table of registers for controlling the C64's SID chip. Not bad.





VIDEO

Retro/Grade Time Lapsed Development
bit.ly/k9Seew

Befitting a game about time shifts, this time-lapse video of two days in the life of a game developer at Twenty Four Carat Games working on PS3 side-scrolling shooter *Retro/Grade* (www.retrogradegame.com) is a window on the sedentary, solitary life of a game creator. The poorly lit, claustrophobic setup may not be the best advert for getting into games, but as a music video for the chiptunes composed for the game by Skyler McGlothlin, AKA Nautilis, it's an oddly effective and quirky match.

WEB GAME

Luftrauser
bit.ly/mNMSI9

Super Crate Box developer Vlambeer delivers some hardcore dogfighting browser action with *Luftrauser*. Controlling a small but strong little plane with the cursor keys, you're tasked with fending off an army of rival planes and battleships. Obliterating the enemy with your cannon causes pixel shrapnel to rain down and, though technically basic, the visual effects and delicate designs evoke a distinct sense of the early Amiga years. When you're not firing, you're recharging your health, so evasive manoeuvres are as valuable as a gung-ho approach. As the challenge ramps up, the seas brimming with battleships and the music pounding in your ears, *Luftrauser* becomes a rousing and riotous game of twitch-based thrills.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

A sprinkling of things that tugged at our attention during the production of **E**231

PERIPHERAL

Immersive Digital Entertainment VR

A mouthful as well as a handful and headful, the Immersive Digital Entertainment VR system from Crescent Inc has to be seen to be believed. Wearing a chunky headset and grasping a rather strange pistol, users navigate a 360-degree virtual space, populated by realtime-rendered objects and animated characters. The most striking aspect is the demo itself: a showroom-style virtual living room with a dancing bear getting its groove on in the corner.

The move toward virtual reality and more advanced AR media may be building steam, but you can't help feeling that dangling a telly off the front of your face and pointing a pistol at dancing ursines might well be a step back for the virtual space race.



continue

Real TV games
Paxman on *COD*; ambulance driving "a bit like *Angry Birds*"

The App Store
Sales up 61 per cent? That's how you do it

Neil Burger
Taking the *Uncharted* movie back to source

A new office
More space in which to build the **Edge** empire

quit

Fake TV games
Come on, The Killing – at least make the actor watch what he's doing

Expensive apps
69p? We're never buying one again

Burger pangs
Rain = not enough action on **Edge**'s BBQ

A new office
More space in which to hoard old junk, frankly

TWEETS

LA Noire 2 – prosecute the cases that Cole Phelps "solved" in the first game. Try not to lose every case due to contaminated evidence
@manveerheir

I jokingly told the press we were adding hat DLC, but that we were worried about resales, so we'd add pre-order bonuses to them. Smooth.
@Notch

Okay I'm installing *Alice* onto my xbox hard drive. We've reached that level of commitment. Worth it for the Cathedral train alone!
@TimOfLegend

Looking at Sir Paul Stephenson's uniform covered in decorations and epaulettes I think "achievement unlocked"
@robmanuel

Oh cool, there's a "block" feature on here.
@llamasoft_ox

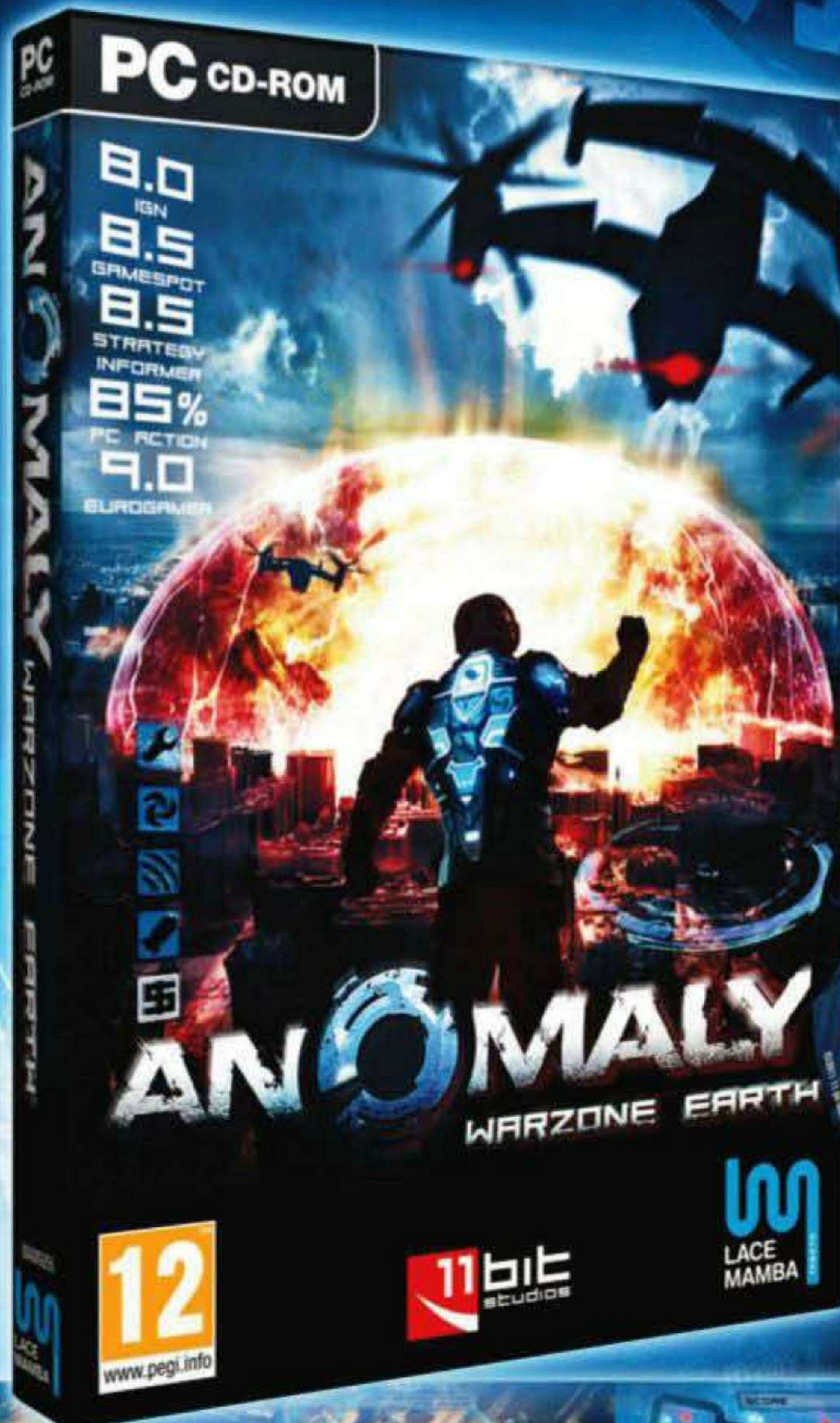


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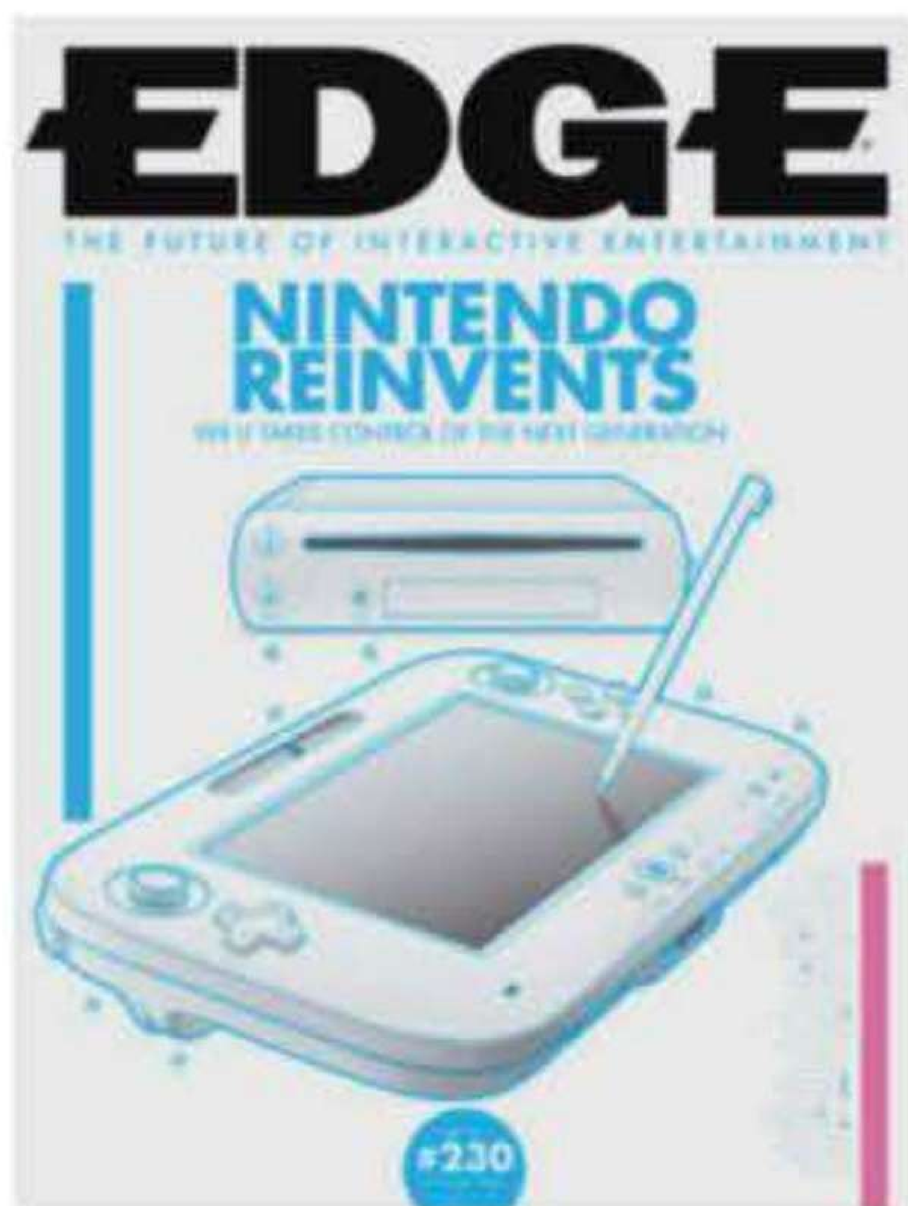

@LaceMambaGlobal

DISPATCHES
SEPTEMBER

Within Dispatches this month, Dialogue sees letter writers go to town on topics such as hi-def remakes, the culture of spoilers, the prospect of IO's upcoming *Hitman: Absolution*, and what happens when you pick up this magazine and give it a good old sniff. In Perspective, **Steven Poole** talks about the disaggregating effect of the Internet on gaming, and why he wants another *G-Police*, **Leigh Alexander** wonders if critics are out of touch with average players, and **Brian Howe** feels the hot breath of a minotaur on his neck.



next-gen.biz
Edge on the Web, with links to all of our online activity



Issue 230

Dialogue



Send your views to edge@futurenet.com, using 'Dialogue' as the subject. Our letter of the month wins a 3DS

Coming around again

The general consensus was that E3 was pretty disappointing this year. There were a few exciting hardware announcements and reveals, but the general trend from the console manufacturers seemed to be a heavy reliance on established franchises.

But perhaps of greater note is the current fashion of 'remastering' old classics in hi-definition. They were everywhere. For me, the highlight of a very lacklustre Microsoft showing was the *Halo: Anniversary Edition*. The biggest culprit was Konami announcing three collections, *Metal Gear Solid*, *ZOE* and *Silent Hill*, and very little else. Which begs the question, what happened to the company that came up with these great series in the first place?

Of course, you can see why remakes are a favourable option. They require significantly less investment than a new title (in both time and money) and they have a readymade audience. They can be a useful test bed to see if the series is still in demand. Earlier this year I played the HD remake of *Beyond Good & Evil*, one of my favourite adventures of the previous generation. While I enjoyed it, I did find that some of my fond memories were spoiled when the game was judged by today's standards. Arguably, it did the game more harm than good. Any old hands were likely to have the rose-tinted specs snatched off their faces and any newcomers were likely to be left wondering what all the fuss was about. Is it possible that even the sacred cow of *Resident Evil 4* could suffer a similar fate?

It looks like remakes are here to stay. The quantity is on the up, but when they're being proudly shown by a prominent developer as their prize exhibit you do have to worry about where the new ideas are going to come from. Been feeling isolated recently by the drive to sell you the same stuff but with a bigger explosions or with a bigger number on the end? Well, how do you feel about being sold the *same* explosions and numbers but with nicer fire and in a fancier font?
Jason Scott

As you say, the modern remake is a double-edged sword. On the one hand it is a safe option, and therefore always likely to attract sneers, but on the other you have games like the recent 3DS revival of *Ocarina Of Time*, about which it's difficult to say a bad word. It helps, obviously, that *Ocarina* just happens to be entirely awesome. *Halo* surely measures up, too, but publishers need to pick their targets carefully.

Spoiler warning

Why is that gamers seem to want to spoil everything? I doubt avid book readers keep their fingers tightly crossed in the hope that someone working for the publisher of the next hotly anticipated novel leaks all the locations, characters and plot details ahead of its release. And yet that is exactly what the clamouring hordes got when the next *COD* was vomited all over the Internet – consumers dined out on the rich pickings with a total disregard for its potential to sully their eventual playing experience.

OK, so we can probably all predict Infinity Ward's inevitably dull plot without the help of leaked information, but that's not the point. But how about *BioShock Infinite*? How many cinema-goers do you know that would happily tuck in to the first 15 minutes of a film they're waiting to see before it hits the big screen? But again, that's what we got from an excitable Ken Levine, eager to aid impatient players in the quest to prevent themselves from experiencing the game's opening surprises for themselves.

I get that people want to know how a game plays, and whether it will be any good, but can't we leave the testing to the reviewers and get back to a time when placing a game disc in the drive was exciting and unknown, not just an interactive version of a video you've already seen?
Stephen Baker

Actually, showing the first 15 minutes as a teaser is a trick games stole from movies. Anyway, our advice: shut down your Web browser and give your new 3DS a spin.

Hitman misses the target

Issue 229's *Hitman: Absolution* preview feature revealed that IO Interactive, far from twiddling their thumbs for the last five years, have been busy removing everything that made *Blood Money* a great game and replacing it with generic 2010 industry tropes.

Like an army that is always equipped and trained for the last war, the games industry seems to feel the need to ape its immediate forebears regardless of whether these fit the game in question. It used to be free-running; now it's chest-high walls and cover, eagle vision and detective mode. One of the great joys of *Blood Money* was wandering around observing, learning, figuring out. I don't want to play a game where the answer is handed to me on a plate. Furthermore, *Hitman* was never a shooter. For most players I know, discovery and the resulting gunfight was a sign of failure, time to reset the level and try something else. If a *Hitman* player wanted to mow down waves of identikit guards and police there were plenty of other games that provided exactly that. The aficionado replays to reduce sightings and civilian kills – opening up on innocent law enforcement is not the point.

The idea of making the game look 'cool' is also problematic. The art direction of *Blood Money* suggested the point of view of the sociopath, a world of horrible people deserving of their punishment, both comedic and tragic, painted in colourful brush strokes. The franchise has been

'dark' before and it didn't work particularly well. To be the 'coolest hitman you can be' requires you to make a value judgement about what a killer should look like. This can only be done through the visor of generic stereotypes – of which Agent 47 is himself one of the foremost examples.

The 'story' in the *Hitman* franchise was always its weak link. Outside of the 'cloned orphan' setup, no further elaboration was necessary. The narrative was the gameplay, the story was 'the accident' that killed a prominent bad guy. It's why the film failed to capture the essence of the game. The game mechanics are the story. IO's plans strip these out in favour of running and shooting.

It seemed unfeasible that a commercially successful and critically acclaimed game did not get an immediate sequel, although they could have been said to be avoiding the usual sequel cycle in the interests of quality. However, the news that work was binned because of 'lighting' issues, when what we wanted was 20 levels of the same – a carefully crafted puzzler – is very sad. The article appeared to suggest that the genius work on *Blood Money* was a bizarre fluke – after all, they had four goes at it so maybe something they threw at the wall stuck. Your article showed a developer that has failed to understand its own creation and what made it worthwhile in the first place.
Matt Killeen


Matt Killeen claims that Agent 47's return in *Hitman: Absolution* shows a developer that's lost sight of its series' core strengths

IO's hope is that better combat skills and 47's new instinct abilities will make a game about creative improvisation as much as perfectionist murder – meaning the immersion-breaking experience of resetting a level to try a new strategy will become a choice rather than a necessity. It'll be a shame if *Absolution*'s visuals are exclusively of the rain-soaked moody variety, however, and we couldn't agree more about the series' previous attempts at a story.

A heroic undertaking

As it has been referenced in both columns so far, I can't help but wonder if your columnist James Leach is on a classic Hero's Journey of his own. The first column in **E**229 represents the call to adventure as he sets out on a series of new columns, asking his audience to ponder the similarities between games and films – something we've all wondered about before – but from the new perspective of narrative. Then, in **E**230, he refuses the call by claiming that stories are passive and that being washed along with them is all part of the fun. I look forward to future columns in which Leach receives supernatural aid from Scribos, the god of writers, and crosses the first threshold of his adventure into the land of Narrativia. Later, he'll meet a goddess, a tempting woman and become the master of two worlds. Long may he, and the new-look **Edge**, continue.
Pete Rawlings

The sweet smell of nostalgia

When I open a new game case the first thing I do is smell the instruction booklet. Even the plastic case and disc have their own particular and pleasant odour. It's the same with any new electronic device – consoles, phones and even DVDs and Blu-ray discs. I just bought the extended editions of Lord Of The Rings and the smell of the packaging is a delight.

So imagine how pleased I was to receive the new-look **Edge**, printed on high-quality paper stock. I flicked through the magazine with my olfactory senses tingling. The smell! I was immediately transported back to my youth when, as an excited 13-year-old, I received a ZX Spectrum for Christmas. Along with this new computer was a game I had been desperate to play – *Knight Lore*. I remember opening the larger-than-usual game box, pulling out the glossy instruction card, raising it to my face and breathing deeply. The smell has stayed with me for nearly 30 years, lying dormant until now. **Edge** magazine smells exactly the same!

Thank you for this wonderful, odour-induced piece of nostalgic time travel. And please continue producing the best-smelling games magazine on the planet.
Nick Howard

The smell! I was immediately transported back to my youth, when I received a ZX Spectrum

If only the odours of the **Edge** office were as welcome as those of the mag itself. Mmm.

ONLINE OFFLINE

Your responses to the topics we invite you to discuss on our Web site at next-gen.biz and our Facebook page.

Could so-called Nuads make in-game advertising a more palatable prospect?

If I pay £100 for a Kinect and then another £49.99 for a game, I do not expect to have to stomach adverts. Interactive adverts have plagued my browsing for years. I do NOT want them in my games.
Samuel Marklew, via Facebook

I seriously would not put up with adverts in games that I pay for, just like when I pay for my TV licence I don't expect ads on BBC channels.
Lee Exley, via Facebook

I pay for **Edge** and that has adverts. I pay for premium TV channels which also carry adverts. I have a lot of ad-supported software on my PC. It seems inevitable that games will use ads more and more. Many games already feature relatively subtle ads – racing games the prime example. Not sure Kinect compatibility makes it more palatable, though.
Simon Johnson, via Facebook

In-game advertising needs to be unobtrusive and not part of the core structure of the game. Product placement in films bugs the living hell out of me. I do not want to be inundated with ads in the games that I play too. It makes sense in games like *FIFA* and *F1*, but to shoehorn it into other genres is plain tacky.
Nick Gillham, via Facebook



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STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

In these days of the disaggregating Internet, will we still get what we didn't know we wanted?

The decline of newspapers, some say, can be attributed to the Internet's power as the great disaggregator. Newspapers aggregate, bundling disparate stuff (news, recipes, fashionista fluff, crosswords and so forth), but the Internet disaggregates. Online, everything can be provided separately, and better, by specialists. You go to Craigslist to look at classified ads; you get your celebrity news from Gawker, your sports coverage from the BBC website, and your sarcastic deconstructions of political phraseology from Unspeak.

If this is true, then modern videogames are swimming against the tide of history, and their rectangular blue air meter is about to run out, triggering a poignant drowning animation. Big-budget boxed games have, for the past couple of decades, been on a hysterical binge of aggregation. It's not enough, these days, to be a shooter; you must have interludes of driving, mech-stomping and flying as well. This is the fairground paradigm of modern videogames to which I referred in a recent column, and the competition at the high end of the market has become a global war between rival fairground mafias, each one barking: "No, our clowns are more psychotic!" The big announcements at E3 this year were all about the nth sequel to long-running series (*COD*, *Halo*) which are no longer really 'games' as we knew them but globe-squatting aggregation brands, showing off their slightly different game-style mixtures. (Look, everyone, a bit of underwater sabotage with handheld submarines!)

The positive side of aggregation is that it can deliver a beautiful surprise. I loved *G-Police* on the first PlayStation, a game of helicopter-based detection and shooting in a futuristic city, but the hardware couldn't deliver on the designers' vision. Playing it again as a PSOne Classic re-release was painfully chugging, yet the game's compelling, downbeat ambience was still intact – as though Michael Mann had stolen the sets for Blade Runner in order to remake Airwolf. For years I had wondered how that game could have been on modern hardware – and then, quite unexpectedly, I found out, when *Halo: Reach* put me in the pilot's seat of an armed helicopter cruising around a futuristic city, half of which was tragically-prettily on fire. There wasn't much detection to do, but the Banshee dogfights over the city were like laser-flavoured butter.

> If you like one of the gamestyles in a modern blockbuster, you can't choose more of it

Yet with this unexpected pleasure came a kind of frustration that is endemic to the aggregation game: I wasn't getting a full-on reimagining of *G-Police* (or *Colony Wars*, another Psygnosis classic of which the space-battle level was eerily reminiscent), but a couple of tempo-changing distractions from the main alien-faceshooting mission. And if you like one of the gamestyles that has been aggregated into a modern blockbuster, you can't choose more of it: you're just herded forcibly to the next ride after your time is up. In general, of course, we happy 'consumers' don't actually get to decide which products are made; we just get to choose among those 'offered' to us. I would gladly pay £100 for another 20 levels of co-operative Spec Ops in *Modern Warfare 2* style, but that's not an option. Instead my only choice will be to buy the swollen aggregate that is *Modern Warfare 3*, hoping that the co-op is equally awesome, and discarding much of the rest. (I'm not interested in shooting teenagers. At least, not over the Internet.)

Meanwhile, it's the spunky, anarchic disaggregators that are stealing mindshare. Flash games, Facebook games, cheap iOS and Android games: they're nearly all built around one repetitive mechanic, as though it were the 8bit 1980s again. (The number of lurid *Canabalt* clones that have sprung up recently is amazing, and slightly depressing if you were a fan of *Canabalt*'s original aesthetic.) The best of these games do one thing, and do it well. **Mike Capps**, president of Epic, is nervous: "If there's anything that's killing us it's dollar apps. How do you sell someone a $60 game that's really worth it? They're used to 99 cents." So far, the way to sell $60 games has been to make them obese aggregations, but more players might be starting to wonder why they are paying so much for products of which they only intend to use a part.

If the aggregation model is eventually eclipsed by the specialised app, however, something valuable will be lost: aggregation's great virtue is that it can give you what you didn't expect, and didn't know you wanted.

According to some media theorists, the aggregating power of newspapers helped create an informed citizenry by showing readers news they didn't ask for. When everything is disaggregated and you see only what you already like and want, creative serendipity is toast. In videogames, too, that might be a shame. The helicopter level in *Halo Reach* wasn't a remake of *G-Police*, but maybe no one was ever going to make that. At least I had my time in the air.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



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LEIGH ALEXANDER

Level Head

Have 'serious' game critics lost touch with the average person's view of a good game?

Those who'd like to see games properly understood and weighed seriously by a massmarket audience believe strongly in what games can be. They laud experimental, emotionally potent works and decry the faintest whiff of commercialism, genre constraint or lowest common denominator-courting risk aversion.

Those sorts of people – OK, let's just go with 'we' – have long resented the assertion that we 'take games too seriously', or are 'over-analytical'. Let the unwashed masses mindlessly consume, it's we who'll pay the special attention that the medium deserves, and through our insights and our learnings we'll... like, probably advance the medium somehow! Yes!

Through the Internet, we can effortlessly build a network of critics who share ideas and challenge each other to be more thoughtful. This community has doubtlessly elevated the conversation that can be had around videogames and the business that creates them, and has helped us define and raise our expectations of play.

But we've also ended up creating a subculture of writers who primarily write for one another. It's too easy to become insular and disconnected from what drives this industry: the average gamer doesn't care who we are, or about what we have to say about 'emergent gameplay' or 'ludonarrative dissonance'. It's not that we become irrelevant as a result – the gaming audience should absolutely be conceived as a spectrum of taste and passions, rather than broad market segments determined by economics and rigid genre preferences. But if we aim, through our criticism, to help the language of play evolve, then preaching to the already converted becomes counterproductive.

The same self-reflexive insularity exists on the development side, too. In some respects this is simply a consequence of creation: no artist or craftsman has much ability to create outside of their own experience. If designers merely cultivate an interest in the videogames they have played and studied in the past, they won't make anything markedly different. If developers have internalised the language of design, then their work will largely be restricted to appeal to those who already speak that language.

> Friends of mine who regard videogames with polite detachment enjoy watching LA Noire

The fact that designers and reviewers so persistently disagree is often evidence of this. It's a common perception in the industry that game reviewers are useless mouthpieces who 'just don't get' design, but that disdain only enforces how disconnected developers can be from how the games they create will be received by the consumer.

Take the prolific yet ultimately ambivalent critical response to Rockstar and Team Bondi's *LA Noire* earlier this year. The game appears 'broken' on both the design and narrative sides: it offers an open world with minimal interactivity, and conversation mechanics where the player often can't tell what the game wants. What kind of hero cop steals cars? Why does the game let players bungle interrogations, often spectacularly, and yet demand believability for Cole Phelps' continual promotions?

But *LA Noire* confused everyone because it rejected established practices. It isn't actually an open-world game, but it suffered for the ways in which people intimately familiar with the genre tried to compare it to one. Critics focused on all the things *LA Noire* doesn't allow the player to do, and searched out all the spots where immersion breaks. But while it's true not every element of the game 'works', critics forgot that the average gamer, the one that enjoys crime shows or historical fiction – the gamer that the developers most wanted to snag – doesn't think the way they do.

Friends of mine who regard videogames with polite detachment (to put it charitably) enjoy watching me play *LA Noire* when they've enjoyed none of the others. They watch, quietly engaged, with none of the usual questions like 'who's this guy again?' or 'why does he have superpowers?' or 'what are you supposed to be doing?' I never have to wince as I hear myself giving absurd explanations about enemy hordes, fictional clans with stupid names, or complex faction discussions that I know they don't understand.

And the things critics say break immersion – that Cole can be a bad driver, or an aggressive interrogator, that he walks funny – it's not that my non-gamer friends don't notice. They laugh. It's just that they're far more willing to accept dissonance, to refuse to be interrupted by it, than critics give credit for. They're not looking for it. I thought my friends wanted to dislike games, but all the while they've been looking for a reason to enjoy them, and it's my critical peers and I that have been focusing on all the things that supposedly 'don't work'.

Games that are familiar and admirable to designers and critics frequently remain a foreign language to everyday players – the folks we all hope will someday understand our culture and buy our products. As long as that condition persists, so will the sense of alienation non-gamers and even casual fans feel.

Leigh Alexander is a widely published writer on the business, design and culture of videogames and social media



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BRIAN HOWE

You're Playing It Wrong

For immediate release to all media outlets: Screwusoft introduces DRM to market; seeks partners

But wait a minute," you must be saying. "As a content provider, I already know all about Digital rights management. It means technology that restricts how people can use digital content they've purch…" Whoa, hey. Sorry to interrupt your oddly informative reply, but stop right there. This isn't your slightly older brother's DRM. This is something entirely different, for the next generation of gamers. We are proud to introduce the new gold standard in anti-piracy technology: the Digital Rights Minotaur.

A few online fringe groups complain that traditional DRM hampers their enjoyment and even violates their rights. We say that's bull. (Get it? 'Bull'? We didn't even mean to do that.) Sure, we grew up in the 1980s and have nostalgic memories of those new-game rituals: ripping open the plastic, leafing through the instruction manual, and then ramming home the cartridge. But life goes on, and traditions evolve. At Screwusoft, we believe that DRM is just the next exciting twist on the ritual, to be remembered fondly by future generations.

Imagine: you're a videogame-loving kid on Christmas morning. You tear the brightly coloured paper off a small package, and there it is – an email printout with an access code circled in merry red ink. You pause to breathe in that special new-access-code aroma. You are now the proud leaser of Screwusoft DRM-enhanced digital content. Thrumming with anticipation, you enter your access code at our Web site and eat or incinerate the printout, then wait eight hours for the product to download and install.

You click 'agree' on the 500-page EULA and upgrade your phone line, because if you lose your Internet connection for even a moment, the game will throw you out. From there, you're just a quick credit check, retinal scan and venereal-disease test away from having fun with your leased content in a safely restricted environment, with the terms 'fun' and 'your' to be defined by Screwusoft and its partners.

> This isn't your older brother's DRM. This is entirely different, for the next generation

"OK," you'll concede, "I'm convinced – with digital rights management, everyone wins. But I'm not hearing anything revolutionary. I want more. We all know customers are filthy crooks who just can't wait to install our product on their second computer like they own that shit. I can say that, right? It's just us here?"

Yes, it's just us, and you're completely right – every time someone buys something from you, they are effectively robbing you blind. But until we convince customers to just give us money for nothing – and, even with microtransactions, that's a few years away – Screwusoft's new anti-piracy suite is your best line of defence. Our encryption algorithms make any software all but impossible to run. Several layers of passwords are changed daily and must be retrieved by snail mail. Just because we could, we threw in a random number generator that must strike triple-sixes to unlock certain game content, like elf ears and player movement.

And then there's our pièce de résistance: if anyone should somehow slip through this gauntlet and actually play a game, a Digital Rights Minotaur comes smashing through the wall and neatly lops off their hands with an axe.

Standing five metres high, covered in dense hair and ropy muscle, our Digital Rights Minotaurs are eternally vigilant deterrents against product use. Where did we find them? Don't ask. These mythical beasts never seem to eat or sleep, and we've got a crapload of them. There's probably one grunting softly outside your cubicle right now, waiting. Since we agree that hand loss is a fair penalty for attempted gaming, it hardly needs to be said that going so far as to make a backup copy for personal use results in an instant deathblow.

Come to think of it, we don't see why consumer theft in non-digital products should continue either, now that the problem has been recognised. Consider car 'ownership'. The vehicle is just the disposable medium; you're really leasing motion. Automobile manufacturers trust their customers not to share rides, and are repaid with rampant motion-piracy – euphemised as 'carpooling' and granted special lanes!

Enough is enough. Why not equip your vehicles with a back-seat Digital Rights Minotaur? With its hot, fetid breath always on their necks, your customers will think twice before giving that elderly neighbour a 'lift' to the pharmacy. And maybe the car's drive shaft should fall out if it loses its connection to our proprietary satellite array! We're just crazy enough to do it.

People often ask us: 'Screwusoft, you crusade so valiantly to make sure no one has fun. As you set about destroying videogames forever, how do you keep your own kids entertained?' Thanks for asking. We'll tell you an industry secret. Since our DRM is impossible to beat, we give our kids the house's climate-control remote, with its big buttons and temperature display screen, and tell them it's a Nintendo DS. They're little kids, still pretty stupid. We all sit there sweating happily on giant sacks of money, as the room grows infernally hot.

Brian Howe writes about music, books, games and more for a variety of publications, including Pitchfork and Paste

#231



THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



bit.ly/it2QiG
Up-to-the-minute previews and reviews

Assassins and artistry

If you bought this copy of **Edge** from a newsstand, perhaps your attention was grabbed by the description of Arkane Studios' fantasy assassin sim *Dishonored* (previewed over the page). There are many more minds behind *Dishonored* than those who worked on *Deus Ex* and *Half-Life 2*, of course, but as pitches go, it's irresistible.

And besides, the influence of Viktor Antonov – art director of *Half-Life 2* – is identifiable from the merest glance at *Dishonored*'s concept art. In an industry where art is rightfully celebrated for its power to conjure impossible worlds into existence, and its ability to take the mundane and give it an unique visual signature of its own (the beautiful decay of *BioShock*'s Rapture, or the way *Katamari Damacy* turns ordinary objects into chunky pick-and-mix sweets), artists are often anonymous.

The first *Half-Life* is a classic, but its B-movie looks are a world away from the sophisticated blend of post-Communist, eastern European architecture and brutal futurist technology that defined City 17. *Dishonored*'s world is very different, but its visual design is based around a similar clash – 17th century fashions blend with the architectural design of inter-war London – and Antonov's ability to capture the visual language of oppression is disquietingly familiar: buildings tower imposingly over the city, while the spindly legs of the Tall Boy enemies patrolling *Dishonored*'s streets recall City 17's iconic striders. It's a familiar talent, repurposed. And a reminder of the astonishing influence both art and artist can have over a game.

As for the other talent working on *Dishonored*, turn the page to discover the thinking that's gone into crafting *Dishonored*'s world – right down to the way in which its (rather unusual – and explosive) power source can be found in carelessly undefended batteries on its streets. One mind might be able to imagine a world, but it takes a team to put it together.

MOST WANTED

Rodea The Sky Soldier Wii
Yuji Naka's studio Prope takes to the skies on Nintendo machines after detours on iPhone and the cute but confused *Ivy The Kiwi*. For those who prefer low blood pressure, the studio's other Wii project, *Family Fishing*, looks much more sedate.

Depth PC
Developer The Depth Team takes team deathmatch underwater with Epic's UDK. As a shark, it's your job to hunt and maul the divers scavenging for treasure, while divers need to play a careful game of hide, sneak and shoot to have a chance of staying alive.

Planetside 2 PC
Sony unveils a sequel that looks every bit the… remake. The planet Auraxis looks gorgeous, the action looks fast, and the vehicles look like hovering slabs of metallic death. The rumoured PC-only release may be a sign that *Section 8* has pipped Sony to its own post, but either way *Planetside 2* looks to be shaping up promisingly.


H Y
P E

DISHONORED

For an assassin, revenge is a dish prepared to your personal taste

Publisher	Bethesda Softworks
Developer	Arkane Studios
Format	360, PS3
Origin	France/US
Release	2012

***Dishonored*'s characters are deliberately rendered to look angular and vague, the design team admitting to having no interest in minute levels of detail. Instead it's more about deep, artistic brush strokes than individual pores and pixels**


EDGE





BELOW **Guards will attack the thugs that infest the shadowy alleys of the game, but they're not on your side – in fact, they often protect the targets you've been assigned to kill. Take them out quietly, or risk fighting heavy reinforcements**

Meet *Dishonored*'s equivalent of the Big Daddy. Known as Tall Boys, these striking enemies have their design roots in a mechanical horse-and-carriage concept dropped during development





Dishonored might be a game about murder, but that doesn't mean that killing people will be easy. "Modern games have got increasingly insulated. They protect the player," claims **Harvey Smith**, game designer on the new assassination simulator. "The player can do this one thing, but it never spills over into this other thing. We deliberately go in the opposite direction." Arkane Studios is creating something that can't be pithily summarised, where execution feels less like a hobby and more like a task that requires meticulous planning. And even then, things will still go wrong.

This firstperson action game takes place in an alternate future, with players controlling an imperial bodyguard wrongly accused of killing the empress he swore to protect. Your job is to take revenge by assassinating the men who framed you. Your primary tools are a sword and crossbow, but the as-yet-unnamed main character has a supernatural aptitude for murder, with the ability to teleport, bend time and possess living things. Combining these skills with a reactive, chaotic world leads to some deliberately unpredictable consequences. "We author the player power systems and AI in such a way that they deliberately interact – sometimes messily, sometimes sloppily – to produce results that we don't even predict," Smith explains. "This is one of our favourite things in terms of philosophy – we're always going for a simulation; systems that run. It's a different philosophy than in games where every situation is scripted, and every player will have the same experience." Compare this with the likes of *Black Ops*, whose players could complete the opening level by firing their weapon only once, during a scripted sequence, and Smith's point seems even more pertinent. The goal is to make every *Dishonored* experience unique: "Our games are like when you and your friends maybe broke into an abandoned house and explored it – it's scary, and maybe nothing happens, or maybe something great happens; around the next corner you're not sure what you'll find."

This freedom means that every obstacle can be approached imaginatively; players can mix powers to produce results the design team didn't consciously plan. One example we see has the hero entering a room full of guards, pausing time and filling the frozen air with crossbow bolts; when time resumes, three satisfying headshots play out. "That's an example of emergent techniques and approaches that the level designers found that we didn't even know," notes co-creative director and president of Arkane, **Raphael Colantonio**. *Dishonored*'s unpredictability has already lead to some deliciously evil results during development: Smith explains that it's possible for you to pause time after a guard fires his gun, possess him and then walk him in front of his own bullet. "When time

BELOW **The outfits of *Dishonored* are based on 17th Century designs and pulp adventure stories from the 1930s. Everything is vaguely recognisable, with a layer of mythology that gives the game a baroque, otherworldly look**



Environmental hazards

Rats are literally everywhere in *Dishonored* – they even help to form the mythology of the world. "One of the important things that's going on is the rat plague – it's killed half of the city, and so a lot of the fiction is related to the rat plague: how the government has reacted, how the people have reacted," Colantonio explains.

"It was based on the second plague in London, but we wanted to get rid of the history – if you want a lot of originality in a game you have to remove it. The idea was to build a universe," states art director **Sebastien Mitton**.



LEFT **You won't find any faces from the Arkane staff here – many of the characters are based on real people photographed in British pubs. An anatomy teacher worked on the concept with the studio to develop *Dishonored*'s weathered and brutal-looking inhabitants**

resumes, the guard's own bullet kills him. It's like a time-travel suicide," he quips. Compared to the cactus-killing thuggery of *Bulletstorm*, *Dishonored* looks like a more refined form of butchery. Your skills aren't limited to offensive use, either. Smith explains: "People figured out how to layer, like we put in a rat swarm and we put in possession, but we didn't think that people would sometimes be summoning a swarm of rats, then possessing one of them. So rat swarm plus possession becomes a mobility stealth power, not just an attack power." Razor mines – anti-personnel devices straight out of the Hellraiser films – can even be strapped to the rats for a murderous crescendo.

Events take place in a grim authoritarian future. It's a world with all the layered subtleties of *BioShock*'s Rapture, and much like that game the environment is as important as the hero you control. "We spent six months looking for the right kind of fiction that combines something subtle, something that's familiar and something really crazy and mystical," notes visual designer **Viktor Antonov**, art director for *Half-Life 2* and the designer of City 17. "The first thing was a city, claustrophobia, something that's threatening and dark in the tradition of Arkane's titles, and plague. We wanted to do something that was based on London and England, and then that's very often associated with steampunk and with Jack the Ripper, so we wanted to get a different aspect of London." Every element of the design has been meticulously considered – it's a dictatorship full of looming shadows and oppressive watchtowers which tells a story without it ever needing to be explicit. While straightforward references have been deliberately avoided, the team aimed to create a world similar in richness to Mervyn Peake's Gormenghast. "That's a really cool fictional England," Antonov notes. "Mixing time periods from the '20s to the Renaissance era with baroque touches. This was the kind of fiction we wanted – elegant, sophisticated and crazy at the same time, but believable."

The mythology is so advanced that even





DISHONORED



The game is inspired by old Europe, but with added layers of technology that turn it almost steampunk

potential power sources have been endlessly debated by the team. "That was a big drama", admits Antonov. "Should we have electricity? It's: 'No, that's too modern, and we'll look too much like this and that,' and eventually we stuck to whale oil. You have a physical source – you actually have a tank that you carry with you." These tanks of whale oil are present throughout the game, acting like massive batteries for the Wall of Light, a crackling security device that symbolises the oppressed society. "They discovered not too long ago how to render this whale oil in a way that provides a very volatile power source," Smith explains. "They're in the middle of what we call an alternate industrial revolution – and so they've got these Tesla-like devices like the Wall of Light that you have to figure out how to bypass." It's possible to find blueprints for the Wall of Light, allowing you to hack the walls and turn them against the guards, much like *BioShock*, or you can heave out the batteries and use them as incendiary devices. Wherever there's the chance to give players a choice, Arkane is implementing it.

As striking as the environment is, it's not just for show – the world feels alive. The ever-present rats are just one of the many dynamic systems in the game. "Big swarms of rats will move around – they're very unscripted; if you get too close to them you can pull them away from whatever they're doing, but if you run away from them they might be attracted to another body instead," Smith explains. "Wherever the rats are, the way they move around the map, they represent threat." The NPCs are equally as unscripted, with guards that stop to admire artwork or warm themselves by fires. The reactive gameplay means that there's usually more than one way to circumvent a problem, allowing players to boldly dash into a room and cut down waves of enemies, or peer through keyholes, lift keys off guards' belts and progress unnoticed. Even the use of stealth is distinct, recalling the acrobatics of *Mirror's Edge*. "One of our goals was to make a stealth system that was not super-slow," Smith explains. "A lot of people put the emphasis on not moving; we wanted a very active stealth, very mobile."

It is, however, possible to progress without bloodying your hands. This is important, since your conduct will have lasting implications on the world. "It's very true that the way you handle yourself will affect the outcome of the entire kingdom," Smith says. Despite being a story of cold assassination, the morality system is more complex that simply choosing between options that are clearly labelled good or evil. "There is branching, which is not only based on what you do or what you don't do; it's more like an aggregate of things you did," Colantonio explains. "We call that the Chaos system. In other words, the more you kill people, the more you disturb an area, and the chances of that branching happening will be bigger." For example, repeatedly summoning swarms of rats in an already plague-ridden world will increase the level of chaos. Ghost through each level without slaughtering innocents, and the world will be a better place. "It maintains the greatest stability, and so a lot of the branches that happen later are what you would expect when things are more stable, more positive," Colantonio says. "If things are more chaotic, it makes you think like life is cheap, there are more betrayals and more bad outcomes." The aim is to encourage you to consider the impact of your actions.

"People put the emphasis on not moving but we wanted a very mobile type of stealth"

Dishonored is already a game full of deliberate, intriguing paradoxes. It takes place in a world of jackbooted authority, but players are free to explore it however they choose. Modernist state surveillance equipment nestles incongruously against grimy Dickensian buildings. As a bodyguard you're sworn to protect life, but circumstance means that you're forced to become a murderer. It's a layered, subtle construction that's unlikely to protect players from their own lack of patience and where a mistake will lead to a brutal, ignominious death. Forget killing with skill – this is about killing with finesse. ■

Q&A
Raphael Colantonio
Founder, president, co-creative director, Arkane Studios



How has the game evolved over time, and has it turned out to be what you imagined the project to be at its inception?
When Bethesda approached us to make *Dishonored* they wanted us to do something that was true to the kind of games that we always liked to do in the past. We came up with this idea with them of doing something firstperson, very immersive, where stealth is important and choice is important, and the pace and the narrative are all player-driven as opposed to a long script. Bethesda was very supportive of this and Harvey [Smith] and I wanted to make this game. Back then we didn't know what period it would be, whether it would be futuristic or past or present or alternate reality, and so we started with something very malleable, London-inspired, old-Europe. So that's how it started and then we added more layers to the story, involved Viktor Antonov who was the art director of *Half-Life 2*, and Sebastien Mitton who's the art director of this game. All four of us together we came up with this fiction which we hope is unique.

Have you reached a point so far where you've looked at what you've done and realised it was exactly what you intended when you began development?
It took a while to see it emerge – this is the kind of game that relies on the sum of mechanics that interact with each other and then when the magic came on board, it came to life. It's like a simulation. And for us, the moment that we started to feel it's coming is when you start to see those systems interacting and you don't plan that. It's a unique moment that feels like it belongs to the player. We just designed our system so there was a logic and this logic just applies in the context of the game. Those moments, when they start to come online – that was the moment we realised this was going to be a cool game.

Morality is becoming increasingly sophisticated in gaming – how did you develop a moral framework that would work in *Dishonored*?
Harvey Smith and I are very interested in morality and in challenging players' morality in games in general. He did a great job in *Deus Ex* and we did some of that in *Arx Fatalis*. It's just this idea that the player can arrive at a situation and make a choice – it's really interesting. Like, am I going to kill this person? If he begs me, am I still going to kill him? And we support that; we allow you to not necessarily be evil. You have a mission, but there are ways around it if you don't want to be evil – but it's your choice. You know that, as you're killing the target, you could have done something else – and this is important to us.

Fighting builds adrenaline, enabling you to unleash magical attacks. While it's possible to survive fights against limited numbers of enemies, many skills are more suitable for devious backstabbing

Tanks of whale oil are found throughout *Dishonored*, powering structures like the Wall of Light. It's possible to rip them out for use as grenades, or modify them to your advantage



The emphasis in *Ghost Recon* has shifted from realism to techno lust. Not least among the Ghosts' gadgets is the augmented-reality display, capable of annotating the environment to pick out upcoming threats and key objectives

H Y
P E

GHOST RECON: FUTURE SOLDIER

Tomorrow's warfighter brings co-op, coordination and careful carnage

Publisher Ubisoft
Developer Ubisoft Paris, Ubisoft Red Storm
Format 360, PS3
Origin France, US
Release Q1 2012

The only vehicles we see during our hands-on demo are hostile helicopters, but at points you will be able to commandeer transport yourself, with Ubisoft's Bucharest studio, responsible for the *HAWX* games, lending its talents to *Future Soldier*'s vehicle modelling

Time was, a *Clancy* game meant inching through undergrowth with a screen full of grass textures, praying that you could avoid the single skull-smashing shot that would signal the end of an hour's unsaved play. Latterly, the *Ghost Recon* series has rather overstretched the implications of subtlety its name suggests, with the squad of elite infiltrators annihilating entire armies in Mexico, exchanging deadly dynamism for the constraints of cinematic bombast.

"I think *Ghost Recon: Future Soldier* will bring you a good back-to-the roots feeling," says **Florent Guillaume**, a designer at Ubisoft Paris. It's an assurance that isn't entirely backed up as we gun through the linear, oft-scripted demo – a breakneck assault through a Nigerian jungle to rescue a hostage. But even if the pace has been cranked way up, *Future Soldier* does at least recapture the sense that you are behind enemy lines, and that some element of discretion is therefore appropriate.

"You can play very intelligently," says Guillaume, brightly overstating the case. "From the beginning we wanted a cunning player, a player who wants to play stealthily or wants to think before acting. Our game is not about running and shooting; you arrive in a situation, observe and examine."

Coordination with squadmates is indeed key here – particularly since the entire campaign is designed around fourplayer co-op – and it's slickly effected through the game's gadgetry and interface. Active camouflage makes the squad invisible, so long as they don't move too rapidly, allowing team members to get into position without the indignity of crawling on their bellies. Then each lines up a target, the precise direction of their aim drawn onscreen – an ingenious shorthand that delivers a payload of information: which hostiles are marked, by whom, and where they are relative to everyone else. Just in case you missed one of those tricksy tangos, a series of checkboxes ticks off the targets as your team gets a bead on them.

"You can play stealthily to sneak around, but the idea isn't to make Splinter Cell"

"We really want to give the players the tools to be able to think ahead and reward that style of play," Guillaume says. "Active camo is a great example of that, but we don't just have camouflage: there are a lot of different tools to help you in this way. You can play stealthily to sneak past your enemies, but the idea isn't to



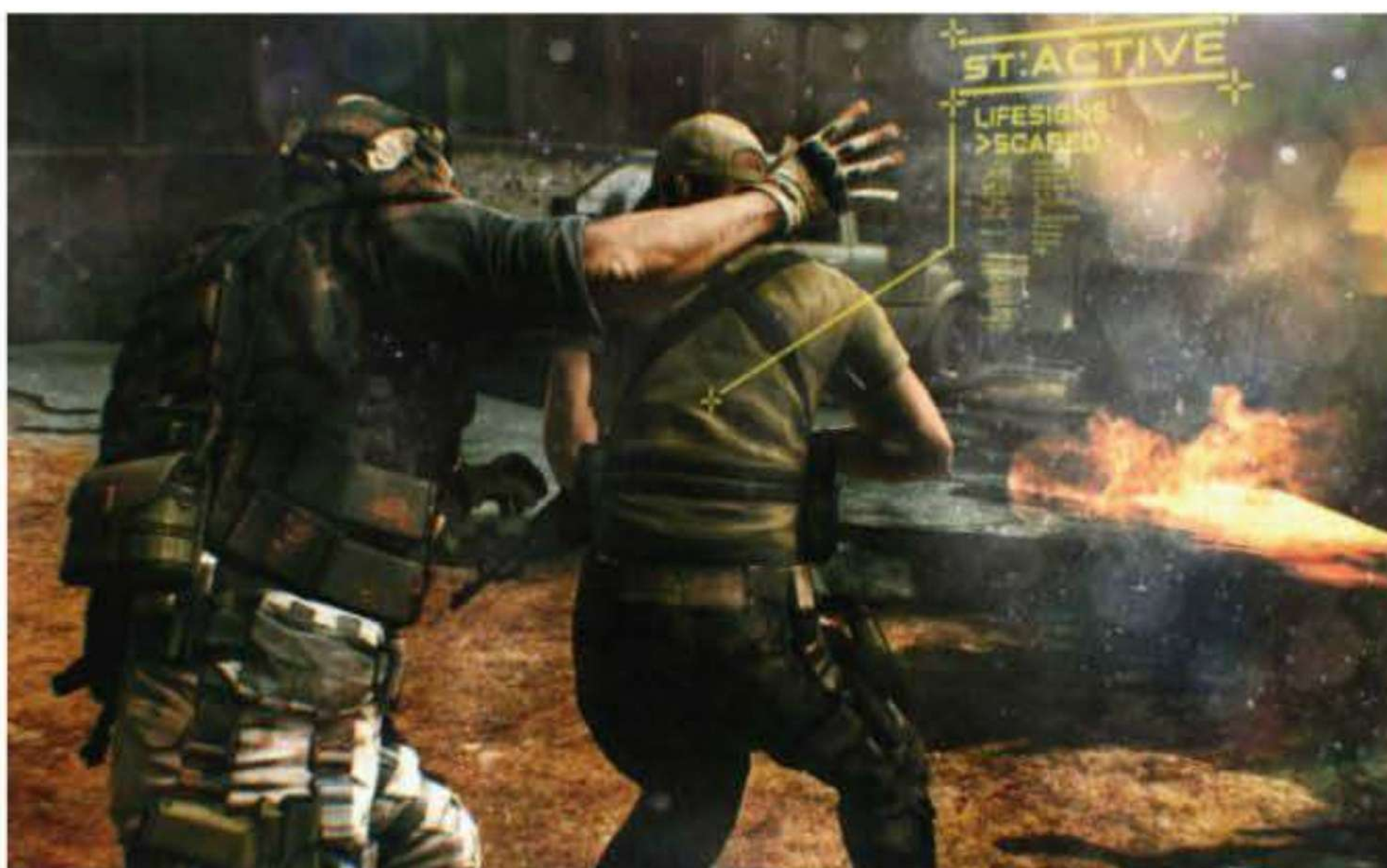


GHOST RECON: FUTURE SOLDIER



Moments such as when an airstrike is called in are heavily scripted, even taking control of movement. "We want to tell a story," says Guillaume, "but we don't want to have a thing that wouldn't be playable"

BELOW **While snapping necks will be a useful way of thinning out enemy numbers, or preventing an alarm being sounded, the Ghosts only use stealth for an advantage in the firefights that follow. There is no such thing as a stealth thermobaric barrage**





There's still a great deal of customisation available, even in the singleplayer campaign. Guillaume explains: "Before each mission Ghosts are able to decide which weapons and gadgets they will use – drones, different kinds of sensors, grenades and so on"

make *Splinter Cell*. Most of the time your objectives will be protected by enemies so you won't be able to sneak through the whole defence. But it's a great advantage to break through the first line and flank the remaining enemies. It sets up good teamplay."

Even if Ubisoft isn't looking to recreate *Splinter Cell*, there's a fair amount of its DNA in evidence with the interbreeding of Clancyverse mechanics and gadgetry. Oddly, Guillaume argues that *Future Soldier*'s innovations are entirely its own – solutions that the team arrived at independently from its Clancy-brand peers. Nonetheless, various vision modes help the Ghosts pick out enemies through walls, while the synchronised breach manoeuvre familiar to *Rainbow Six* players becomes a fundamental part of *Recon*'s repertoire. Cuts back and forth to satellite footage allow for the sort of time-eliding edits that marked *Splinter Cell: Conviction* and, as with that game, writing is also projected within the environment to mark objectives – although here the excuse isn't artistic licence; such signage is part of the Ghosts' augmented-reality vision aids.

Not that a great deal of guidance is required for our hands-on, which keeps the player on a strict track from the opening amphibious assault to the explosive exfiltration. Step off the narrow path and the screen pixellates alarmingly as you 'lose signal', forcing errant players back in line. One of the few hallmarks of early *Ghost Recon* to have survived the leap to the current generation was the occasional willingness to deposit the player in a huge environment and allow them to forge their own path through it. No such thing is in evidence now, but Guillaume insists that such freedom has been curtailed for display purposes in this demo.

"Maybe we won't be as open as the first *Ghost Recon*," he says, "but we are going in that direction; we have very open situations where you can engage from every angle, we have multiple paths and so on."

Towards the end of our playthrough, an assault upon a warehouse does offer flanking opportunities. Our team moves with invisibility activated, darting between concrete barricades that dot the bridge to take out a nearby sentry, then fanning out left and right before tearing apart everyone in the central killzone. But we worry that this is as dynamic as it gets; many of the game's gadgets or dramatic actions are only available through scripted sequences. The demo climaxes with the Ghosts coming under heavy fire from helicopters as they try to extract a



Competitive spirit

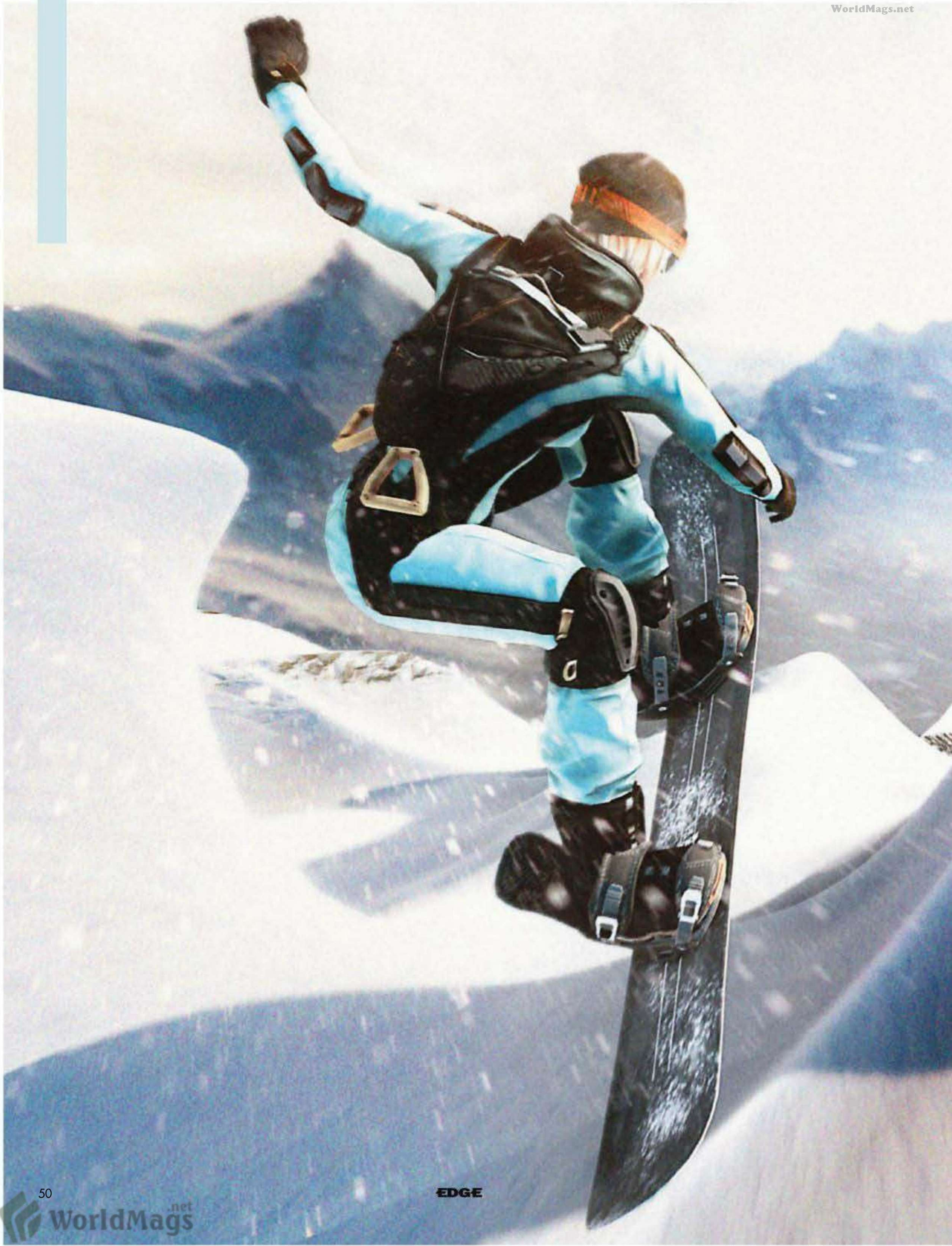
With PC gamers receiving the free-to-play *Ghost Recon Online*, we ask Guillaume how *Future Soldier*'s own multiplayer component will stand apart. "*Ghost Recon Online* is more – I wouldn't say hardcore, but it's a more community-based experience," he says. "It's based on a frontline mechanic – so you have to push the frontline forward into enemy territory and on to the final point. It's very different to what we do in *Future Soldier* – we want to focus on the coordination and objective modes. You don't have the same gadgets and tools, but there will be some bridges between the two games."

"We're not going for Middle East settings only," says Guillaume of the Ghosts' globe-trotting as they pursue a weapon-smuggling ring. "We have Nigeria. Zambia too. And we're going to Bolivia, eastern Europe and Peshawar in Pakistan"

hostage. Without player input, the ghosts go into a diamond formation and what follows is a not-entirely-disappointing compromise between cutscene and gun battle. The camera skews and slows at dramatic moments, as your soldier dives between cover, now beyond your control save for the ability to aim and squeeze the trigger. The sequence ends when, through an equally involuntary act of initiative, the squad leader calls in a thermobaric barrage to evaporate the helicopters pinning you down. You can guide the missile in, at least.

Limited it may be, but it's far from disastrous. Indeed, the combination of cinematic flair and limited involvement does cause a quickening of the pulse and the game moves so fluidly between interaction and script that you are not pulled completely from the world, as you would be in a QTE. Nonetheless, it's impossible not to lament the *Ghost Recon* that recognised the player's choices as paramount, even if that choice left you quivering in the mud, paralysed by the fear of what a bullet might do to your fragile body.

That mantle seems to have been left to the more fulsome sims – *ARMA* and *Operation Flashpoint* – while *Ghost Recon* pursues a career as a military-flavoured corridor cover shooter. With the customisable loadouts and full potential of *Future Soldier*'s semi-sci-fi kit yet to be explored, it may prove to be a cut above its competitors. But even with the most competent and co-op enabled gunplay, we can't but wonder whether scripted thrills are really the right selling point in a market overshadowed by *Call Of Duty*. Here's hoping that the future of soldiering envisioned here doesn't prove to be shortsighted. ■



H Y
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SSX

Fascinating tech triggers the rebirth of a snowboarding icon

Format	360, PS3
Publisher	EA Sports
Developer	EA Canada
Origin	Canada
Release	January



bit.ly/reJjbr
Screenshot gallery



SSX

Not only does the diverse terrain include branching paths, but some spots include multiple vertically tiered routes as well. These arrive thanks to the new wingsuit, which lets riders grab more air



Like a rider encased within the fresh powder of an avalanche, the *SSX* franchise went missing shortly after the end of the previous hardware generation. The PS2 original helped to bed in the new wave of consoles with its bold settings and effortless tricks, but after three multiplatform sequels the series vanished, reemerging just once for the cartoonish Wii exclusive, *SSX Blur*. With an eponymous revival on the horizon, the question remains: why did this beloved brand stay silent for so long?

"It certainly hasn't been without effort or want that we haven't brought *SSX* to this generation of consoles," says **Todd Batty**, creative director at EA Canada. "It was just a matter of the right timing and the right idea." Citing past comments from EA CEO John Riccitiello and EA Sports president Peter Moore about the need to pursue fewer, larger game releases, Batty explains: "They were waiting for the right level of innovation and big enough ideas to really justify not only bringing *SSX* back for this version, but really relaunching it as a franchise."

That level of innovation, according to Batty, can be seen in the studio's new Mountain Man technology, which quickly transforms NASA satellite data on real-life mountain ranges into in-game levels that can be easily tweaked and manipulated. Not only was that discovery a crucial element in revitalising the push for a new *SSX*, but he also believes it may help shape future EA properties. "The days of massive armies of artists spending months and years crafting every pixel – it's not cost-effective any more," he notes. "You can't build games at the size and the scope that we want – to compete with the biggest triple-A blockbusters out there – without doing things differently."

The use of Mountain Man data to prototype stages was not done in an effort to push the series towards the simulation side of the genre, however. Batty insists that the maps are just starting points for thrillingly crafted racing and trick experiences – such as one level sprinkled with segments of the Great Wall of China. "We knew we'd be taking creative liberties with the data. What it did allow us to do was rapidly prototype levels very quickly," he explains. "Our goal is only to deliver an iconic representation of what that part of the world or that particular mountain might be like, not to deliver a realistic riding experience of what it would be like to ride down the north face of Everest."

"Massive armies of artists spending years crafting every pixel is not cost-effective"

Q&A
Todd Batty
Creative director, SSX

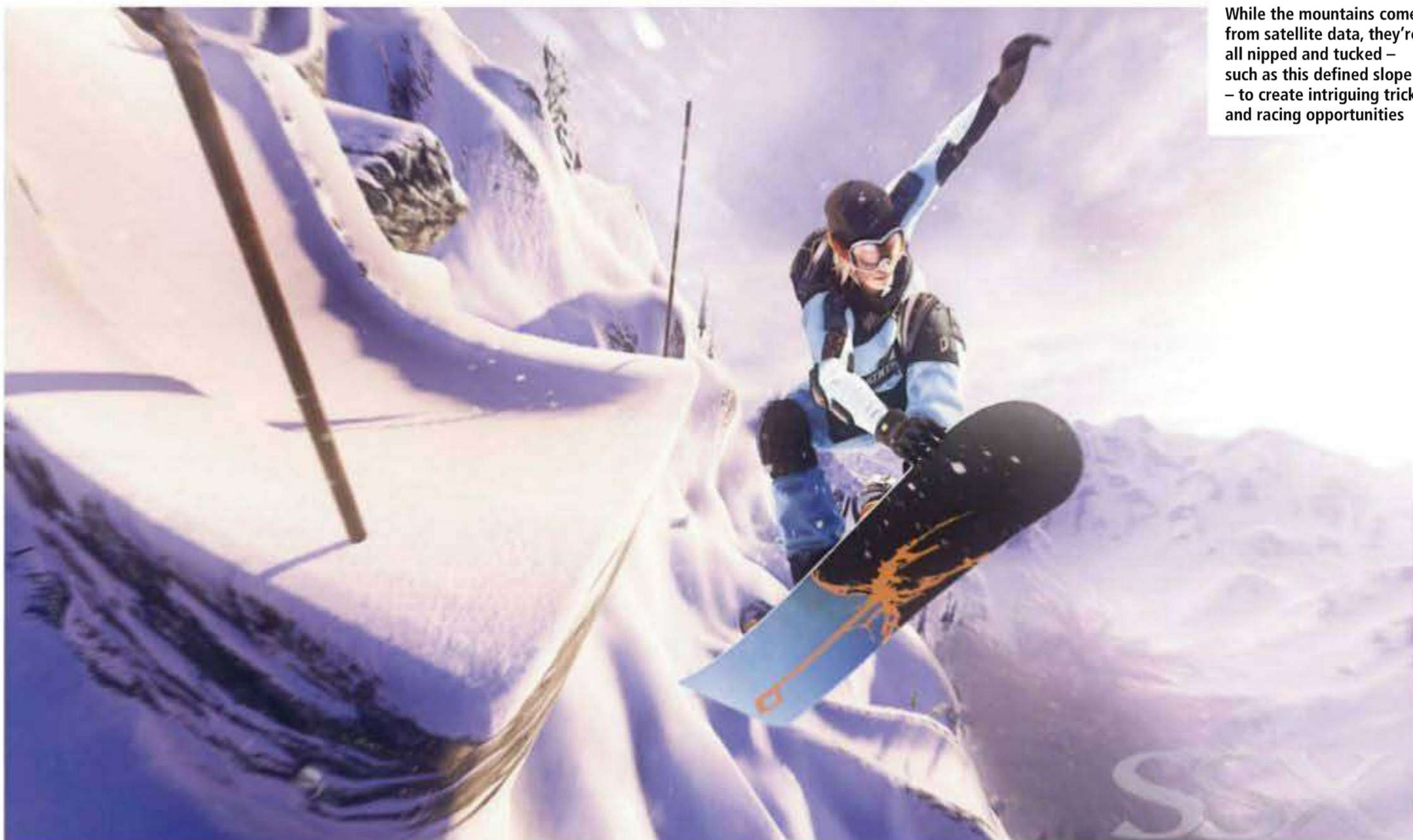


Were there any solid previous attempts within EA to bring the series back before this one gained traction?
When I was asked to take another kick at bringing *SSX* back, I had heard of some previous attempts both within our studio and in other studios at EA – and I was fortunate enough to be able to contact one of those teams and ask what the big sticking point was, and why it never materialised and came together. I get the impression that none of those made it past early concept phases. I know that there have been multiple attempts, but none of them went seriously far, for sure, or I would know about it.

Did you at any point consider including skiing for this iteration?
We had skiing in at very early days in this *SSX*, and I was actually one of the advocates; I was pushing that we should have it. That's something that made its first appearance in *SSX: On Tour*, but the tough thing about skiing is that every single animation in the entire game would have to be duplicated for characters with skis as opposed to characters on snowboards. If we did skis, it would mean half as many tricks split across skis and snowboards. *SSX* at its core is a snowboarding game first and foremost. We'd love to do skis at some point in the future, maybe as DLC or in a follow-up version to this one, but that was something we had to let go.

Do you feel pressure to address fan desires and demands, even if it conflicts with what you want to do with the game?
Oh my god, yes – every single day. I can't even begin to explain to you the amount of pressure I feel on my shoulders every day working on this game. I know how much it means to people. Personally, by the time this game finishes, I will have spent three years of my life working on it. I'm a pleaser at heart and I want to make everyone happy. When you listen to fans a lot, which we've done so much of on this game, one fan will passionately tell me they want one thing, and another will tell me the exact opposite. I can't make everybody happy with everything that we do.

It's a tremendously difficult thing to do, and the pressure sometimes feels very strong, but at the end of the day it's an opportunity to bring back such a loved franchise. I feel more and more confident every day that we're heading in the right direction as we engage the community and start hearing positive feedback with what we're doing. We take a lot of joy in that.



While the mountains come from satellite data, they're all nipped and tucked – such as this defined slope – to create intriguing trick and racing opportunities

Yet much of what we've so far seen of *SSX*'s core racing and trick-based events bears much less of the neon sheen associated with the past releases; in its place are more realistic-looking cliffs, characters and scenery. But Batty claims that it's simply a matter of the team building the core structure out in waves and saving the boldest elements for last. "The tracks that people have seen right now, they're probably still a little bit more weighted toward natural terrain than they are toward the kind of over-the-top set dressing. You'll see a lot more of that stuff," he says.

As seen in some of the startling initial promotional materials released when the game was first announced, *SSX* also has a darker, action-oriented side in the form of Deadly Descents survival stages. These occasional missions – referred to internally as 'exciters and delighters' – exist as boss battles of sorts where the player fights through the elements to complete an objective. A variety of such stages is included, Batty claiming that each is "unique in its own right." One sees the player escaping an avalanche at night, all while playing from a reverse overhead camera perspective – the only time this particular view is used in the game.

Beyond the solo campaign's three pillars of 'race it, trick it, and survive it', EA also has big plans for *SSX*'s online interface. While exact details on the competitive multiplayer will be revealed at Gamescom in August, Batty says the team has spent a lot of time seeking a way to eliminate the hassles associated with scheduling matches with friends and flipping through cumbersome lobbies.

"We believe we've solved all of those things," he says. "We've created an online system that will let people interact with their friends at their own convenience more easily, simply, and without headaches than any game has ever done before. We've placed friends and interactions with friends at the absolute core of our online multiplayer experience. I think what people end up finding there is going to be very welcome."

Aside from multiplayer events, online-connected riders can also place and discover Geotags around the world in solo or network play. Unlocked by completing objectives or spending in-game currency, these user-generated collectables can be dropped anywhere in the world, earning credits for the owner until snagged and tempting all those who approach it. Since currency is used to amass better gear for riders, the incentive is there not only for players to hide them in hard-to-reach canyons or at the apex of massive jumps, but also for all other users to find them and claim the bounty. And the game will display nearby tags from friends and mutual pals, transforming collection into a socially networked game of hide-and-seek.

With *Need For Speed*'s Autolog having already shown what a smart social framework can bring to a familiar series, it makes sense that EA is prioritising such interactions for *SSX*'s rebirth. But even without its online features or its survival-themed set-pieces, *SSX* looks more than capable of luring players back to the virtual slopes. ■



Familiar faces

"The characters, for a lot of people, are the heart and soul of *SSX*," Batty asserts, which although it raises a few eyebrows does help explain why EA is placing so much emphasis on its piecemeal rider reveal initiative. Favourites like Elise, Mac and Kaori are among the returning faces, but all of them have been updated with fresh looks and new backstories. "We needed to make sure the characters could fit within our world, and at the same time try to maintain and hold on to the elements that we thought really made those characters who they were," Batty says. "It's been an enormous challenge."

With the location of Dom's missing wife wrapped up in *Gears Of War 2*, it's now Marcus Fenix's turn to focus on family: the mystery of his father's whereabouts is a driving force behind the campaign's direction

H Y
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GEARS OF WAR 3

As Marcus Fenix fights for closure, Epic Games' war never ends

Publisher	Epic Games
Developer	Microsoft
Format	360
Origin	US
Release	September

A doomed voyage through Lambent waters provides an early opportunity to showcase one of the many titanic boss fights. Whether Carmine (right) can beat the increasingly slim odds of survival remains to be seen

Gears Of War 2 no more invented Horde mode than *Gears Of War* invented lock-to-cover. Just as elements of the tactical cover system can be traced back to, among others, *Metal Gear Solid* and *Operation: WinBack*, Horde's ancestry stretches back through *Quake* mods to *Space Invaders*.

But inventing something isn't quite the same as winning it breakthrough popularity and, by unearthing and refining these ideas and propelling them into the spotlight, *Gears Of War* outgrew its original role as Epic Games' Unreal Engine showpiece and instead became a Pied Piper of a shooter, with a wave of copycats in its wake quickly turning fresh-feeling ideas into genre mainstays.

It's hard to see how *Gears Of War 3* can continue this trendsetting streak – its focus has been on improving existing modes and mechanics. The co-operative campaign ups the count from two players to four, and an enhanced Horde reprisal sits proudly at the head of its feature list. Multiplayer has even ablated features, with Photo mode falling victim to cuts. And it's unlikely the new Beast gametype, an inverted take on Horde in which the goal is to gib the humans, will be a game-changer in a post-*Left 4 Dead* world.

But if *Gears Of War 3* is going to bequeath a lasting legacy to the genre, Horde mode could once again be its vehicle thanks to a sweeping mechanical overhaul. Money now makes Sera go round, with every kill generating cash to unlock defences. Once players buy up a command post the local area fills with green images of fortifications, split into barriers, turrets, sentry guns, decoys or even the new Silverback mechs.

The first pickings of each class are rudimentary: caltrop blockades and diversionary cardboard cutouts of Cole offer little respite from the horde, but further investment soon turns the humble defences into more effective equipment. Electric fences, laser gates, explosive mannequins, Troika turrets and more all await investors.

Electric fences, laser gates, explosive mannequins, Troika turrets and more all await

Horde 2.0 feels like a thorough reworking of the second game's mode, absorbing elements of the tower defence genre and reworking them. That the players themselves comprise the towers to be defended ensures there's no confusion for returning fans. Horde's basic features have been affected by





GEARS OF WAR 3

For all of the Lambent Locusts' extra power, their soggy popping death animations cannot come close to matching the raw satisfaction felt by reducing the tribal Savage Locust horde to pocket-sized portions of plasma



the new economy too, with prices for extra weapons, ammunition and lives allowing you buy back into the game after death and change loadouts on the fly. Alternatively, weapons and cash (which you collect and manage individually) can be exchanged and gifted at the press of a button. Ammo counts are smartly displayed prior to these swaps, ensuring nobody's left with an empty chamber as the result of a pernicious trader.

The apparently overwhelming stack of new survival aids exists for a reason: the volatile nature of the Lambent Horde's Imulsion innards rules out close-quarters tactics, and every tenth enemy influx brings boss characters such as Berserkers and Brumaks into the fight. But even these won't mix up combat as much the new Mutator system, which allows the game's host to pick from 15 perks that apply modifications to the game. Some are positive (including unlimited ammo clips and instagib melee), others more problematic (such as switching on friendly fire or the need to perform perfect active reloads), and some are plain wacky (such as big head mode or 'bad mood' characters who spew rivers of cusses). All allow players to further personalise the challenge.

Elsewhere on the multiplayer side of the package Epic must address balancing issues – such as in new adversarial mode Team Deathmatch. The ease with which downed opponents can be killed from afar removes all need to run in close and execute fallen fighters, which leads to more measured players growing frustrated as their team's pool of 30 lives is quickly drained by overenthusiastic cowboys. As the excitement in these bouts only truly begins once just a handful of lives are left in the pot, the majority of Team Deathmatch's running time can feel redundant. With both Execution and Warzone modes returning – both of which enforce a strict lives limit on teams from the outset – it's difficult to single out Team Deathmatch's appeal.

The volatile nature of the Lambent Horde rules out close-quarters tactics

Either way, an increased frequency of special event matches, not to mention a social calendar integrated into the main menu to point them out, will be used to try to tempt players away from their annual doses of *Call Of Duty*. Epic Games might be now looking towards a new generation of hardware and a new Unreal Engine to go with it, but *Gears Of War 3*'s online offering seems well-equipped to keep the franchise afloat until Xbox 360's final breath.

Q&A
Rod Fergusson
Executive producer, *Gears Of War 3*



You've added a host of new features and complexity to Horde in *Gears 3* – do you risk leaving casual players behind?
I don't think so. It's one of the things that we were really sensitive to when we were doing the design. We knew that there were people who were going to be familiar with it and people who weren't. One of the things we tested early on was, if you didn't use fortifications at all and you just chose to build that first command base, you can still play it like *Gears 2* Horde – you can plant shields, plant grenades, and just hole up and try to defend. So with the fortifications, if you want to play at a higher level and take it to that next step, that's there waiting for you. But for the player who's just getting into it for the first time, it's very much an opt-in situation, as opposed to being forced upon you.

How did implementing fourplayer campaign co-op shape the game's design?
Well, there's a reason it took until *Gears 3* to do it. There are so many challenges in trying to accommodate four players, especially the way that we do it. We didn't want to do an army of clones; we wanted to do story-relevant characters. And so as soon as you say you're going to do fourplayer co-op in the *Gears* world with story-relevant characters, it's a real challenge just from the narrative side. Basically, nobody goes through anything alone – they always have three witnesses.

And beyond that, you have to think: 'OK, we're going to have four people running around and they all want to take cover, and they all want to flank'. It really causes you to have to open up the environment, and create room, and make sure all those things are available to that number of players. We've gone back to that *Gears 1* approach to what we call 'combat bowls'. Here's a play space that's big enough, and you can go explore it and do whatever you want to do because there's room for you to do it. With four people, you can't really restrict their movement too much.

Did it prompt you to tweak enemy characteristics as well?
Fourplayer co-op is part of the reason the Lambent came to be. When you have four guns and better human control, they all want to be effective and they all want to kill stuff. You have to take the enemies up a notch for them to be able to compete against four really good guns shooting. So the Lambent have their mutating arms that allow them to shoot over cover. The head mutates, the arms mutate, they can shoot three players at the same time.








If Epic chooses to conclude the trilogy with a few twists and turns it's conceivable that the undeniable human facets of Locust Queen Myrrah (above) will be referenced somehow. New female Gears, meanwhile, prevent the human side of the war from being too much of an all-male outing. New Locust include the Lambent Berserker, which sports tentacles




Design showcase

Epic's Unreal Engine 3.5 powers *GOW3*, which could potentially being crowds of more than 100 characters and destructible environments to the game.



Fourplayer co-op multiplayer campaign options (above) mean there are three times as many opportunities for revival should somebody fall after misplaced bravery. The new co-op chaingun (right) should go some way to encouraging more careful progress, with one player relegated to the role of ammunition mule for the character carrying the business end. Melee weapons (left) provide methods of disembowelment beyond the trusty old Lancer

As if the search for Fenix's father wasn't personal enough, Epic is unlikely to resist using his romantic entanglements with Anya Stroud as a plot device





bit.ly/oY9oSw
Extensive Rod Fergusson interview

H Y P E

ASSASSIN'S CREED: REVELATIONS

Are we getting Revelations when we want revolution?

Publisher Ubisoft
Developer Ubisoft Montreal
Format 360, PC, PS3
Origin Canada
Release November

Here's one possible, dark revelation that may yet emerge from Ubisoft's third Renaissance-era outing: an annual release is a tough sell to players who haven't got around to finishing last year's massive, open-world, action-adventure-cum-property-development-sim. But for those who have assiduously assassinated every Templar stooge, run every rooftop race and hoovered up every cashbox, flag and feather to be found in Italy, Ezio's forthcoming adventures in Constantinople will surely offer much more. The question is whether content alone will suffice; whether the well-worn mechanics have seen enough change to sustain another sprawling release prior to the inevitable announcement of *Assassin's Creed 3* (presumed to arrive at the end of next year).

Lead game designer Alexandre Breault points to new Ezio's new toys – the hook-blade, an improvement on the hidden blade, allowing you to ride ziplines, reach farther while climbing, and do nasty things to people in close quarters. Then there's bomb-crafting, with new explosives to aid escape or even create new routes via demolition.

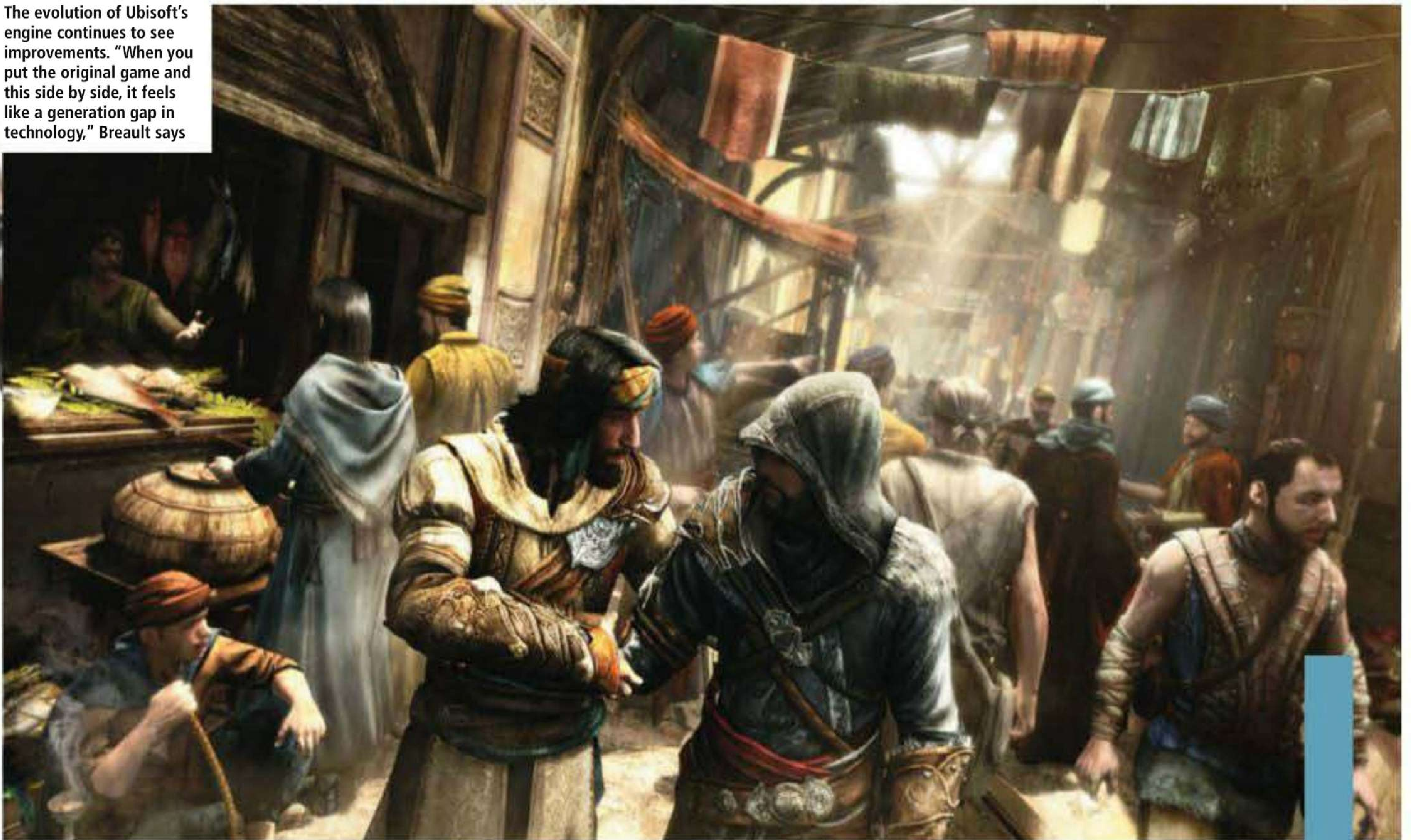
The territory-control metagame also gets a kick of dynamism, with the Templars pushing back, forcing you to defend conquered strongholds. And most

The move to Constantinople will introduce Ezio to a raft of new characters, including Manuel Palaeologos, heir to the crushed Byzantine empire; Prince Suleiman – later to be the Ottomans' greatest ruler; and his uncle Prince Ahmet (below)



16th century Constantinople is just one stop on the itinerary: Ezio will take a trip to the underground city of Cappadocia and the original Assassin stronghold of Masayaf. Rhodes may also feature, at least as a multiplayer location

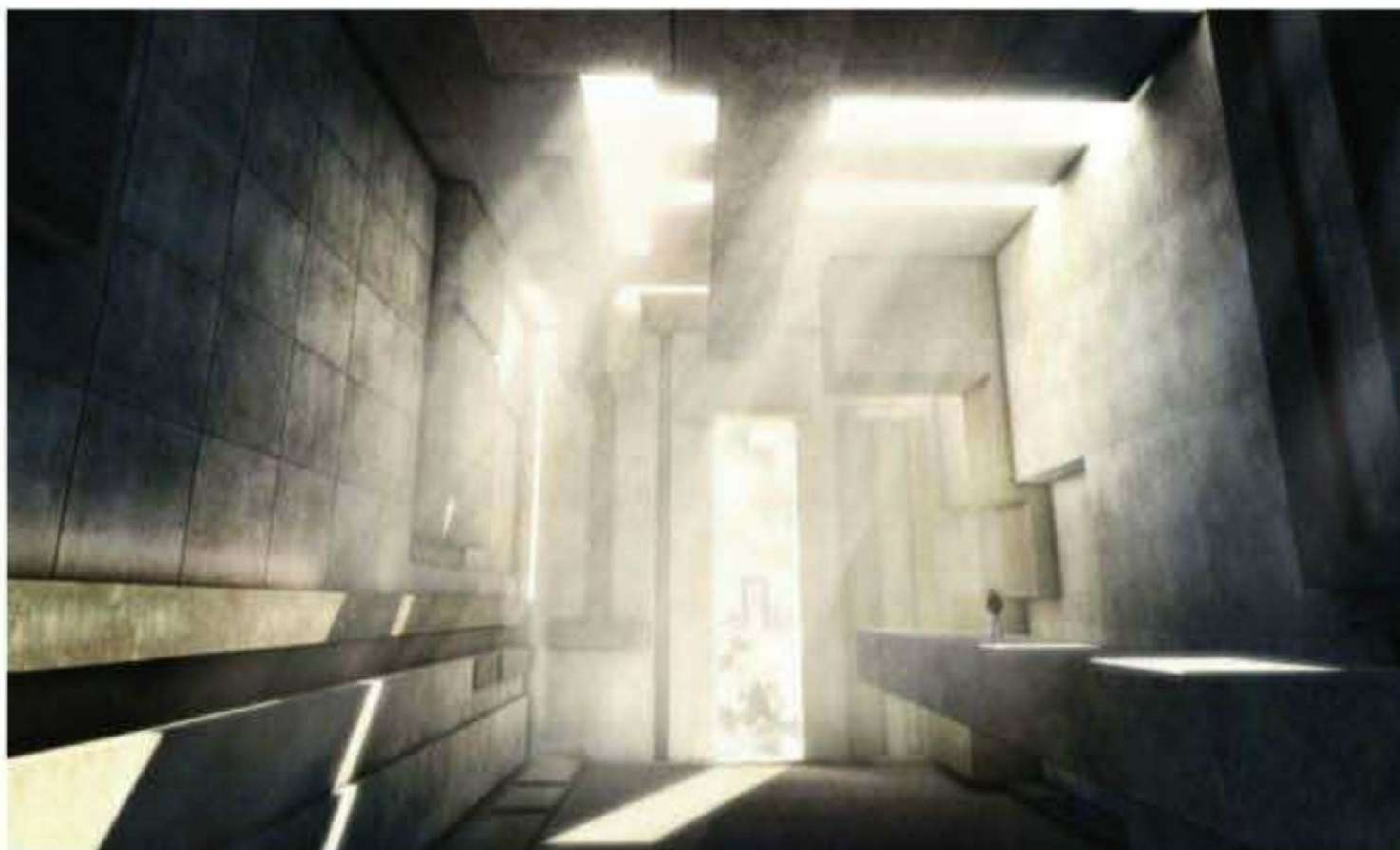
The evolution of Ubisoft's engine continues to see improvements. "When you put the original game and this side by side, it feels like a generation gap in technology," Breault says





ASSASSIN'S CREED: REVELATIONS

Brotherhood ends with a comatose Desmond being stuffed into the Animus and finding an abstract world from which he must escape to wake up. "One focus in our game is to see the impact of what happened on Desmond," Breault says



importantly, says Breault, a concerted effort has been made to make each assassination feel unique and special, rather than a recurring mission type.

The clearest draw, however, is the city of Constantinople and its rich history, which Ezio will encounter as the Ottoman empire ascends new heights and the supplanted Byzantine rulers plot their re-emergence with a little help from those ever-nefarious brokers of power, the Templars. Intriguingly, the game

A concerted effort has been made to make each assassination feel unique

also promises to be a three-hander, with the action substantially revisiting former protagonist Altaïr – and his very-very-great-grandson Desmond, who is stuck in a coma following the dramatic events at the end of *Brotherhood*, and must piece together his own mind before regaining consciousness. Quite what this entails is yet to be revealed, but screens reveal an Animus-projected limbo world of stark greys and floating geometric shapes with the potential to take platform-puzzling in an extravagantly abstract direction – and for all the bombs on offer, this seems to promise the most novelty.

Meanwhile, for those who remain largely unanimated by the historical to-ing and fro-ing of the retrofitted sci-fi plot (which can now claim to be literally Byzantine), the delightful cat-and-mouse of multiplayer returns. The mechanics are ostensibly those of *Brotherhood*: assassins prowl through the streets after quarry who will have attempted to mingle with AI characters who bear their likeness. However, Ubisoft has made some welcome tweaks: a more nuanced scoring system means that a target can still salvage some points if he manages to get a punch in while being stabbed.

The overall infrastructure of the online component has been improved too, along with the addition of extra modes and character customisation (obviously, non-player characters change to resemble you as well, so you can still blend in).

Is that enough to satiate the desire for the sort of major mechanical advances promised by a title ending in the big number three? The likelihood is that *Creed* fatigue won't slow the franchise down now; *Brotherhood* remains Ubisoft's fastest-selling game, and even the part of us that feels tired just thinking about all those feathers is eager to rub shoulders with Suleiman the Magnificent and other figures from Constantinople's colourful past. This is a game that has history on its side, in every sense. ■

Q&A Alexandre Breault

Lead game designer, *Assassin's Creed: Revelations*



These games show a real love of history. Have you stumbled across any interesting discoveries during development?
Actually, one of the elements that we added in after investigating the past of Constantinople was the Greek fire you see being used in the E3 demo. It was basically a flamethrower that was used in the sixth or seventh century by the Byzantine empire. It actually existed at that time: a kind of flamethrower! The big change, however – because we always take a little bit of liberty – is that the real one took three men to be able to operate, I think. But we took the inspiration of how it worked and managed to conceive of a smaller version that one person would be able to operate. But it was a real weapon. Actually, that weapon was what allowed the Byzantine empire to hold Constantinople for so long; they were surrounded by the Ottoman empire for a long time but with that weapon they had an edge that allowed them to control the sea around the city. The exact recipe of what they were using is lost to history and nobody knows exactly how they did it, but [whatever substance it ejected] was actually able to carry on burning in water. The Byzantines were notorious for it, and when we saw it we were like, OK, we need to make a weapon based on that!

Now that the Borgias are wiped out, who are the next historical villains?
The Templars are now manipulating what remains of the Byzantine empire that's been overthrown by the Ottomans. But it's not as black-and-white as in *Brotherhood* – it's not necessarily all of the Byzantines.

Do you think adding a sci-fi element is the only way you could get large numbers of gamers interested in history?
It's hard to say. Of course, that has been our approach, but I think that as soon as the history behind something is interesting then the player will be interested. But I think it's the contrast between the sci-fi and the historical setting that gives us a unique feeling. It also gives us the liberty to explain really clearly to the player what the context of the story was, because the player views everything through the Animus – which is the way Desmond sees the game, too. The Animus is there to help *him* understand the context. Everything we put in the game can then be justified explicitly by saying: 'Such and such building is there because...' Desmond himself wouldn't necessarily know this stuff so it's useful for him to have that information. We try to make sure that everything fits within that structure, where we have several layers.

A Renaissance-era version of the flashbang can now be used to stun pursuers, allowing Ezio to make a clean escape. The game introduces a crafting system too, so you can make your own bombs



Both Ezio and Altaïr feature as playable characters in *Revelations*, and both are searching for answers. Breault: "Ezio's goal is to learn more about a certain person and the assassins' origins"







The E3 demo bore witness to an audacious escape, with Ezio torching an entire fleet of ships before dashing along burning masts and swinging on rigging to reach his own boat

HYPE

FORZA MOTORSPORT 4

Microsoft's flagship racer expands in every conceivable direction

Publisher	Microsoft
Developer	Turn 10 Studios
Format	360
Origin	US
Release	October

When you're fettling surgically accurate car models and offering clinically meticulous physics, accusations of symptomatic sterility are almost a given. *Gran Turismo* has suffered chronically, and while the problem was certainly diagnosed in *Forza Motorsport 3*, the issue wasn't entirely eradicated. This time around Turn 10 has applied the perfect salve.

In striving to add a sense of soul to its car sim, the Redmond-based studio has collaborated with Top Gear, the BBC show that takes car-bore content and packages it not only to make it digestible by the masses, but popular among those who have no interest in engines. At worst, the existing racing game faithful benefits from a more characterful *Forza* experience. At best, this could defy the widely perceived mainstream decline of the racing genre in the same way Top Gear's own death spiral was reversed a decade ago.

The reality will likely fall somewhere in the middle. Since its inception in 2005, *Forza Motorsport* has become an enormously popular series in its own right, and whatever your opinion of Clarkson et al the prospect of more imaginative challenges based on their weekly antics is tantalising. Much of the presenters' participation remains under wraps, but revealed so far is narrated editorial as you examine the micron-detailed vehicle models

Clarkson may like Mercedes, but his commentary is applied to all sorts of marques here. He describes the Ferrari 458's predecessor, the F430, as looking like a "leering idiot", so at least you're guaranteed a brand of vernacular faithful to that of the TV show



bit.ly/qluAzm
Screenshot gallery


AMG



FORZA MOTORSPORT 4



Forza's track design takes inspiration from the great driving roads on the planet. The Bernese Alps circuit will feature around three to five loops set in and around a luxury ski resort and a Swiss village. The largest will feature a dramatic climb and descent along winding roads, though available grip will be consistent with *Forza*'s apparent fear of loose, icy or greasy surfaces

in the game's Autovista mode. Predictably, but no less crucially, the show's proving ground at Dunsfold Aerodrome is recreated in the game, and unlike in Polyphony's offering, it's accompanied by the Kia Cee'd, meaning that lap times can be directly compared to those of the weekly celebrity guests. Scrabbling for a way to feel in some way superior to Tom Cruise? Your opportunity awaits in the shape of a modest mid-sized hatchback from the Pacific Rim.

This is just the veneer, though. Turn 10 promises that Top Gear is a creative partner and content provider, rather than just a badge on the box. The show's influence will be found in every element of the game, including the career and community portions. The career, in particular, now rebranded World Tour, enjoys more general diversity this time. Drift and autocross events reflect the increasing popularity of Ken Block's take on motorsport, and grids are bulked up to 16 players for certain races, depending on the circuit and event rather than technical limitations. Track Day tasks you with overtaking a number of slow-moving cars over the course of a single lap, and heat races take place at different times of day on the same circuit. For those with an established relationship with the series, there will be save-data transfer that will offer initial cars and credits based on progress in *Forza Motorsport 3*. It won't be a direct transfer, lest it harpoons the new game's own progression curve, but it is certainly a good reason to reacquaint yourself with the excellent predecessor in the months prior to release.

The rich *Forza* community, which has been present in some form or other since the series' inception, should benefit from enhancements as well. The larger grids offer obvious benefits for breadth and variety of competition, but the current vogue for asynchronous multiplayer is catered for too, in the shape of Rivals Mode, which opens up matchmaking to the entire playerbase, rather than just those that happen to be connected to Xbox Live at a given moment – though whether it'll merely pit players against track times or give them ghosts to race against is unclear. Friends and car club pals will be prioritised, but strangers who are of a similar skill level will also be served up, and bounties offered dependent on the disparity in ability between competitors. Beat a player on one of the preset challenges, divided into separate channels, and they will be notified the next time they connect to the service.

Drift and autocross events reflect the popularity of Ken Block's take on motorsport

Elsewhere, the support for Kinect first contrived for E3 2010 has matured in line with Microsoft's militant ambitions for its motion-sensing technology. Autovista's support for the peripheral as a means of inspecting vehicles is in, as is the riff on Track Day that sees you gripping an invisible, intangible steering wheel and leaving braking and acceleration to the discretion of the game. Both are almost certainly novelty additions for the majority of players, and it's abundantly clear that *Forza 4* will never mandate the use of Kinect in any of its features. Of more interest to traditionalists is head tracking, which allows drivers to look towards the apex of corners or simply examine the fastidiously recreated dashboard of their vehicle while otherwise unoccupied on a lengthy straight. With such a complex map of nested menus to manoeuvre through, Kinect's voice navigation, which allows you to reverse instantly out of one mode and park neatly in another, may also become the de facto means of navigation.

As with any authentic automotive tune-up, there are also more subtle tweaks underneath that may not be immediately obvious. A new image-based lighting system applies reflections to your car based on the entire environment, meaning that vehicles appear more convincingly embedded in locations, and also allowing for more high-contrast track settings, such as the crisp Bernese Alps circuit. The tyre model has been rewritten with the help of Formula One supplier Pirelli, and there is now a mode that allows players to remove driving aids that were present but obfuscated in *Forza 3*. The roster of manufacturers, meanwhile, has been broadened to 80 to encompass more obscure marques. Whether your metric is content, innovation or sheer effortless execution, *Forza Motorsport 4* appears destined to collect the champagne and laurels yet again. ■



Reasonably priced controller

While Kinect support negates the need for a controller, that hasn't stopped a pair of peripherals surfacing alongside the announcement of the game. One is a simulation-oriented effort from premium manufacturer Fanatec, which also manufactures a line of outrageously expensive Porsche-branded controllers. The other, potentially more interesting, item is the Wireless Speed Wheel (left), a U-shaped device based around accelerometers which also, crucially, offers analogue triggers. It seems to be positioned as a middle ground between the lack of feedback from the Kinect 'air wheel' and an enthusiast sim setup.



Rayman is apparently woven from moonbeams by a nymph in order to defend the world from nightmares. We're hopeful that Ubisoft won't spend too long expounding upon this

Rayman and chums have expressive, exaggerated animations, stretching and deforming almost entirely with every leap and flail. This comes, however, at the expense of precise spatial awareness





Tumbling into these eager jaws doesn't mean instant death if you've swiped a collectible heart. An upgrade system suggests you may be able to add extra heart slots

HYPE

RAYMAN ORIGINS

Forget 3D: ditching depth may be the best thing Rayman's ever done



Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	Ubisoft Montpellier
Format	360, PS3, Wii
Origin	France
Release	December

Lums are the currency here, found incarcerated in cages or in positions that tempt risky acrobatics. You can buy upgrades with them, and co-op performance is rated on their collection

You may have never thought to ask about the backstory of Rayman, that also-ran platforming protagonist of the '90s last seen fraternising with the Raving Rabbids. Yet here is the answer, delivered in a glorious hi-definition 2D prequel – one which is very evidently encouraged by *New Super Mario Bros Wii* and its successful rejection of the third dimension. Unbidden though Rayman's reappearance may be, *Origins'* world makes up with its chaotic mash of styles, pitching comically grotesque flat-shaded caricatures against indulgently painted backdrops.

For all the pixels thrown at it, it's not always a comfortable aesthetic mix – but that uneasiness adds character where Rayman himself lacks it. And if you look beyond his bland, smirking nugget of a face and floppy boy-band mop, there's something unsettling about him too: he's an oddly insubstantial sort of hero for a platforming game, with his floating, detached appendages subtly disrupting the player's ability to pinpoint his body in space. In *Origins*, however, alternative protagonists are available: the globular Globox and two teensies now return as playable characters.

Indeed, this whole cast can be witnessed in action at once in the fourplayer co-op mode, which takes no small number of cues from *New Super Mario Bros Wii*. But whereas *NSMBW* was something of a cinch in singleplayer, made difficult only by the collision with co-op partners, *Origins* is a delightfully ruthless platforming challenge, quite happy to dispatch the coiffed hero into instant-death pits or the gaping maws of monsters, resetting him at the last sparingly placed checkpoint.

In co-op, the screen is busy with action, but with collision between characters disabled (barring intentional slaps and punches) there's less in the way of the deadly pratfalls which complicate *NSMBW*'s levels. And, just as in that game, a fatal plunge sees the character float back onscreen in a bubble, increasing your team's chance of survival during the game's more ingenious labours. One of the desert-themed levels forces Rayman through environments infested with winged creatures which swarm upon him unless driven back by the sound of a gong. The noise creates a shrinking bubble of protection around Rayman, which lasts only just long enough for the player to power through the platforming perils and to the next gong. Not a second can be spared and, played alone, this proves quite the task.

Other levels fail to show off the same degree of novelty – one spelunking sequence ends with Rayman having to climb as the camera pans upwards to escape a slowly ascending terror; here a monstrous many-tentacled creature that stands in for the traditional rising lava. The jungle levels are a warren of passages, meanwhile, many concealing secrets only reachable in co-op, wherein players can choose to act as platforms for their companions. Flumes of water rush Rayman on, complicating collection of currency – here the living creatures called Lums – and occasionally sending him careening into vengeful, khaki-clad, pith-helmeted explorers (or 'explorators', in the series' idiom).

More than 60 levels round out the experience, promising flight on the back of giant insects, swimming sections and a trip to the land of the dead itself. Rayman's personality may never really have inspired curiosity, but if this presages increased attention to the 2D platformer from moneyed studios, then it's a welcome return indeed. ■



Give it away

Rayman Origins is the flagship title for UbiArt, a 2D art pipeline intended to help artists plop assets from their electronic easels into the game with less programmer intervention. Once a creature has been doodled, it's cut into component parts, given a bone structure, and then placed in keyframe positions. The tool works out the deformations required to get one pose to animate into another. It's an efficient framework, even if it does lend itself more to digital puppetry than organic frame-by-frame animation, and Rayman's creator Michel Ancel has stated his intention that UbiArt be released as open-source software.

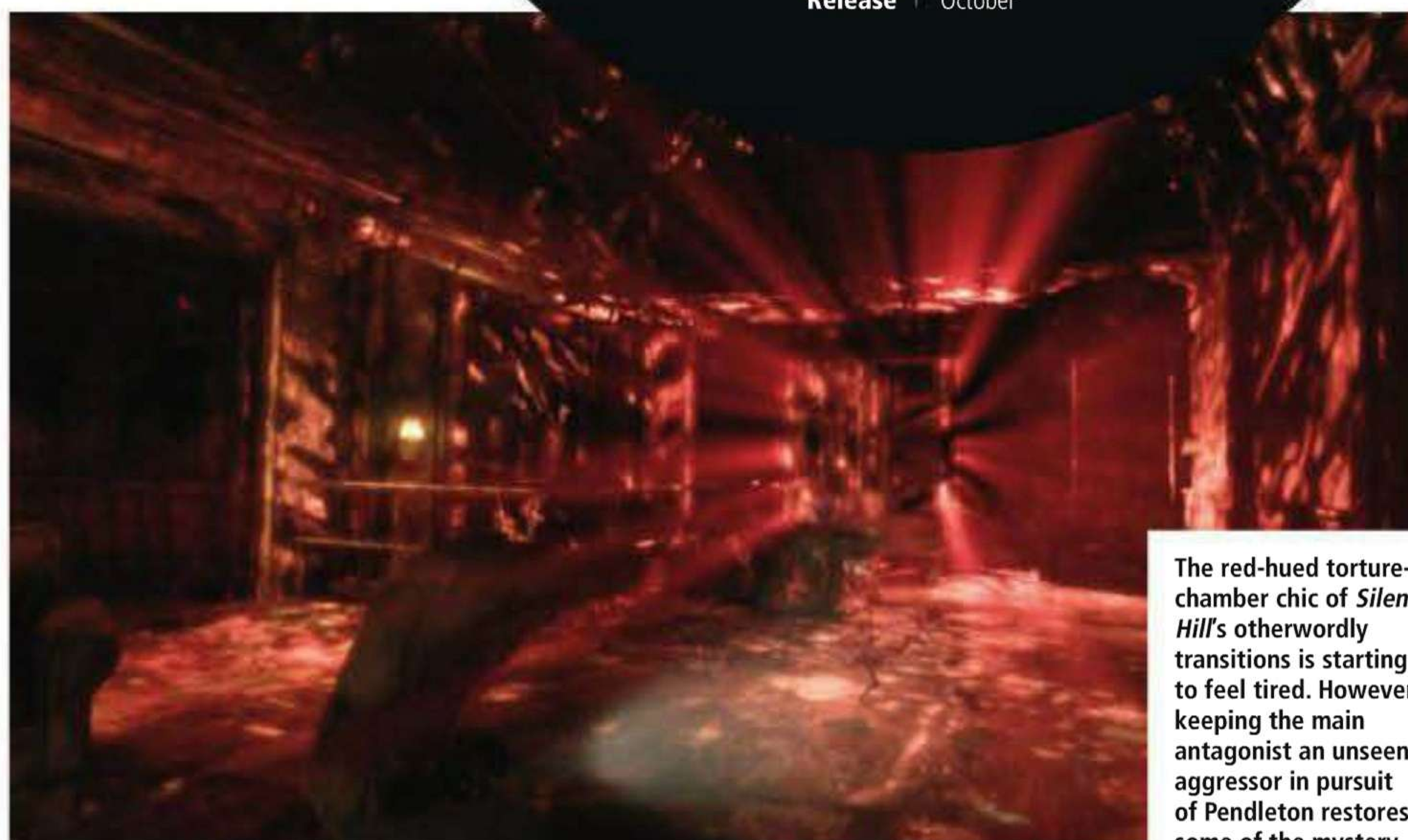
HYPE



SILENT HILL DOWNPOUR

Vatra Games takes Konami's series for a walk in the rain

Publisher	Konami
Developer	Vatra Games
Format	360, PC, PS3
Origin	Czech Republic
Release	October





The red-hued torture-chamber chic of *Silent Hill*'s otherworldly transitions is starting to feel tired. However, keeping the main antagonist an unseen aggressor in pursuit of Pendleton restores some of the mystery

Guns will feature, but Pendleton's been limited to bludgeoning the grisly beasts in the code we've seen. As in *Shattered Memories*, weapons deteriorate with use – encouraging players to make improvised use of other items in the area





bit.ly/qIlf5b
Screenshot gallery

Downpour's excellent lighting is the source of much of its atmosphere, as is its artists' capturing of dirty, rural decay. You'll fear the rotten wood collapsing under Pendleton's feet as much as the monsters

What is Silent Hill? A sleepy New England tourist trap? A fog-shrouded netherworld? A nightmarish hell dimension? The lore would have it that Konami's ghost town is all these at once, though the truth is simpler: it's whatever its current developers want it to be.

And at first glance, you wouldn't be entirely blamed for thinking that Czech developer Vatra Games would like to *Downpour* to be *Alan Wake*. Silent Hill was half-abandoned long before Bright Falls came along, of course, but Vatra, in moving from the series' iconic decrepit suburbs and into the surrounding forests, can't help but recall Remedy's game. It's a feeling that the demo's opening, in which the flickering neon signage of gas station beckons a player dropped into a darkened forest, does little to dispel.

The pacing of the game is traditional *Silent Hill*, however, with freshly escaped convict Murphy Pendleton (he's being transferred when his transport crashes on the fringes of Silent Hill, kicking off the events of the game) exploring the town's almost empty outskirts in a manner more frequently punctuated by puzzling than violence. Early challenges have pleasingly uncontrived solutions. A locked gate is opened by battering its chain with a crowbar discovered nearby, for instance, and a missing ticket machine needed to operate a cable car that will take Murphy farther into town (slightly more contrived) is tracked down by following the marks in the dirt left by the person – or thing – who dragged it away. The result is a Silent Hill that feels earthy and physical – which makes it all the more disturbing when things get very weird.

Water is the defining motif of *Silent Hill: Downpour*. The rain of the title functions much like the series' traditional radio – when the heavens open, monsters are near – and that's not the only way in which water should be feared. Pendleton's explorations soon have him poking around a grotty, abandoned diner. A gas leak leads to a fire, but when Pendleton hits a nearby alarm the sprinkler system spews out oily, viscous water – before long, the scene is transformed, taking on the familiar industrial-hell aesthetic of the series' otherworldly sections.

It's more than just a visual change, however, as the environment is suddenly much more hostile – a bright, shining otherworldly force chases Pendleton down a corridor that seems to never end, lengthening every time he nears a corner. Pendleton can throw objects in the unseen assailant's path, and holding the left bumper at this point activates a reverse view – suggesting such chase scenes might be a recurring feature of the game

Unlike Harry Mason from 2009's reimagining of the first *Silent Hill* title, Pendleton is capable of defending himself more directly. Like Mason, however, he's restricted to making use of whatever items are currently at hand, or strewn throughout the immediate environment – such as chairs, broken bottles, or the crowbar he picked up earlier – rather than carrying a bristling inventory at all times.

While there are already indications that Pendleton's journey will see him heading farther into Silent Hill before he can escape, moving the series away from its well-worn haunts restores a little of the horror game's most precious commodity: fear of the unknown. With this generation's *Silent Hills* having veered between flawed experimentation and formulaic predictability, *Downpour* might be the series entry that gets the balance right. ■

Plot delivery



Silent Hill isn't entirely abandoned, of course. Midway through our demo Pendleton stumbles across a postman, who vanishes after dispensing some suitably cryptic statements. He's not the only enigma, however, the motivations – and backstory – of Pendleton himself seem to be obscured by the game. The crime he's initially imprisoned for, and whether or not he's guilty of it, is unknown, but given the series' tendency for reflecting the psychological torment of its protagonists via its environments and settings – Pendleton's fear of water has already been established – we suspect his crimes won't stay hidden for long.

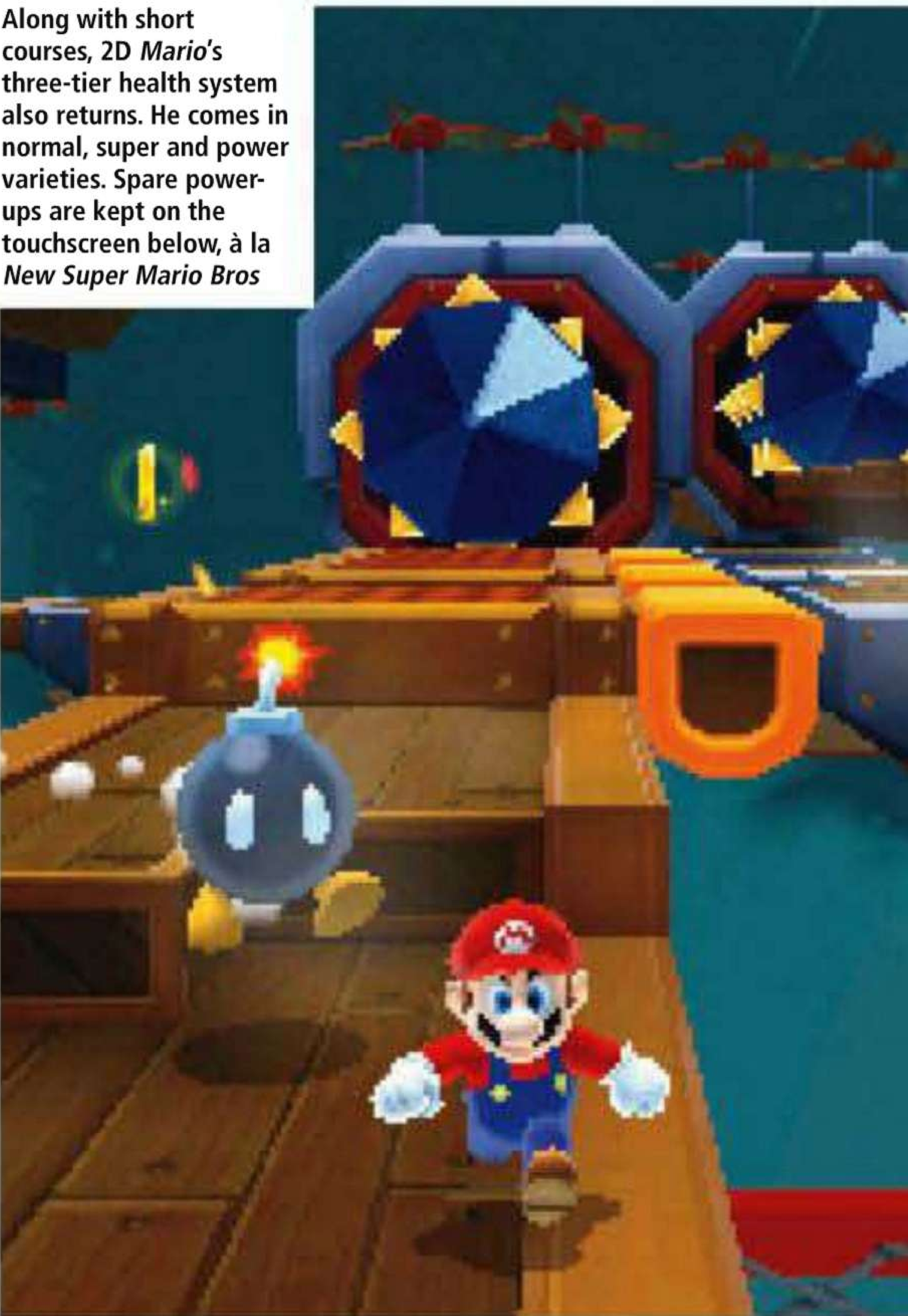
This stage, built from flipping tiles, spawns from a row of switches. In order to guarantee safety, Mario must trigger them in the right order so as to choreograph the level's unfolding routes



Levels are viewed from a fixed angle, though some (right) allow touchscreen prodding to shift the view by a couple of ten-degree increments. Others (below) are consumed side-on only



Along with short courses, 2D *Mario*'s three-tier health system also returns. He comes in normal, super and power varieties. Spare power-ups are kept on the touchscreen below, à la *New Super Mario Bros*





HYPE

SUPER MARIO

He doth bestride the narrow world Like a 3D colossus

Publisher	Nintendo
Developer	In-house
Format	3DS
Origin	Japan
Release	Q4 2011





SMB3's Tanooki suit returns, but without its statue and flight abilities. It offers a tail swipe (aping *Galaxy*'s spin attack) and a flutter jump; the latter removes Yoshi from the picture

It's easy to forget that the majority of Mario's fans are not fans of his 3D games. *New Super Mario Bros* vastly outsold both *Galaxy* outings, and Shigeru Miyamoto has himself admitted that easing stragglers into 3D realms remains a key priority. *Galaxy*'s spherical planets mainly exist to remove the obstacle of camera control for thumbs accustomed to two dimensions, but *Super Mario* on 3DS is a more substantial measure. Here, 3D level design looks to the old ways: linear three-minute stages, policed by a ticking clock and concluded with a flag grab. Beneath the toy-block aesthetic beats the heart of the most traditional *Mario* in years.

Nowhere is this more keenly felt than in a 3D rebirth of *Super Mario Bros'* world 1-2. Familiar blue bricks line the walls of an underground tunnel viewed side-on. Only by booting a green shell and watching it zigzag in and out of the foreground are we reminded of a third dimension. Other 3D elements are of the schlocky B-movie variety, placed around the linear left-to-right path. Piranha plants spew ink into the foreground and spiked balls swing out of the screen. Likewise, in a trip across *Super Mario Bros 3*'s airships, Bullet Bills fire outwards and a second row of ships waits to be explored in the background.

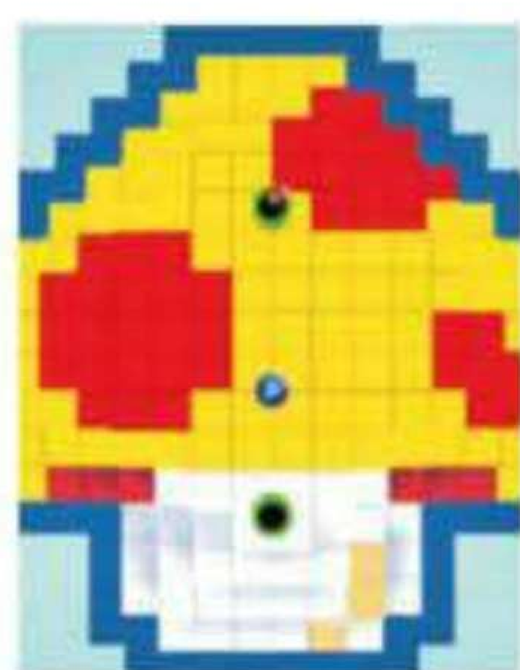
Other stages welcome *Galaxy*-like landmasses (pruned to portable proportions), but litter them with 8bit level furniture. Bounding up a cliff face through warp pipes, musical blocks and yellow elevators showcases an unashamed retro bent, with no effort made to disguise levels behind a theme. Or perhaps the theme is Mario. During a developer roundtable, director **Yoshiaki Koizumi** called *Super Mario* "the most Mario-like Mario game that we can make." An interesting claim, though one slightly hard to swallow having already gorged on *Galaxy*'s fantasy dreamscapes. Musical jump blocks are fondly remembered, but giant space apples they ain't.

Mario's ambling trot and heavy jump take our fingers back to their NES days

Having set a retro agenda it seems odd that *Super Mario*'s best stage is the one closest to *Galaxy* in flavour. Set on a network of flip-flopping tiles, it's a gauntlet that builds under Mario's feet while ominously deconstructing in his wake. While the frantic dash that ensues reminds us that EAD Tokyo is better at breaking new ground than wallowing in nostalgic love, it does prove that the renewed focus on shorter 'courses' needn't limit innovation. Stages shown during Koizumi's roundtable stint reveal an experimental grab-bag: sprinting along Cheep-Cheep-besieged piers one second, enjoying a bizarre *Zelda* dungeon homage the next (see 'The legend of Mario').

Indeed, the only constant is Mario. Or is he? *Super Mario*'s Mario is a radical departure. EAD Tokyo slows him down, caps his jump height and removes the triple jump and back flip. The aim, it appears, is to replicate the rigid moves of a 2D sprite in a 3D world. And, yes, Mario's ambling trot and heavy jump do take our fingers back to their NES days. Question is, do our fingers want to return to their NES days? They were quite happy, ecstatic even, gambolling around giant space beehives. The return of a dash button is particularly contentious. Kudos for capturing the 8bit sensation of Mario's accelerated jog, less so for forcing a button-press to travel at a reasonable speed.

While *Super Mario* displays the level of surface gloss we've come to expect of EAD Tokyo, there is some conflict at its heart. 3D visuals jar with the 2D feel, the cleverness of the 2d-but-3D animation easily mistaken for tardiness. Likewise, nostalgic nods to *Super Mario Bros 1* and *3* only draw attention to how easy *Super Mario* is in comparison. There was nothing in our demo session to make the thumbs sweat. In trying to be all things to all people, this particular *Mario* is lacking in direction. Does that noncommittal name – only a working title for the time being – hint at the purest *Mario* to date, or a mascot in desperate need of a destination? ■



The legend of Mario

In honour of Link's 25th anniversary, or so Koizumi jokes, EAD Tokyo built Mario a dungeon. Viewed from a familiar eagle-eye perspective, we watch Mario scamper between self-contained puzzle chambers. In one he bounds over whirling spikes, in another he gobbles down a fire flower in order to light three torches and unlock a door. A sneaky swipe at stagnating *Zelda* puzzles? Koizumi clearly hasn't tried *Skyward Sword*. Incidentally, the top-down angle showcases stereoscopic 3D at its best: jumping 'raises' Mario towards the screen. We'll have that 3D remake of *A Link To The* Past now, please.

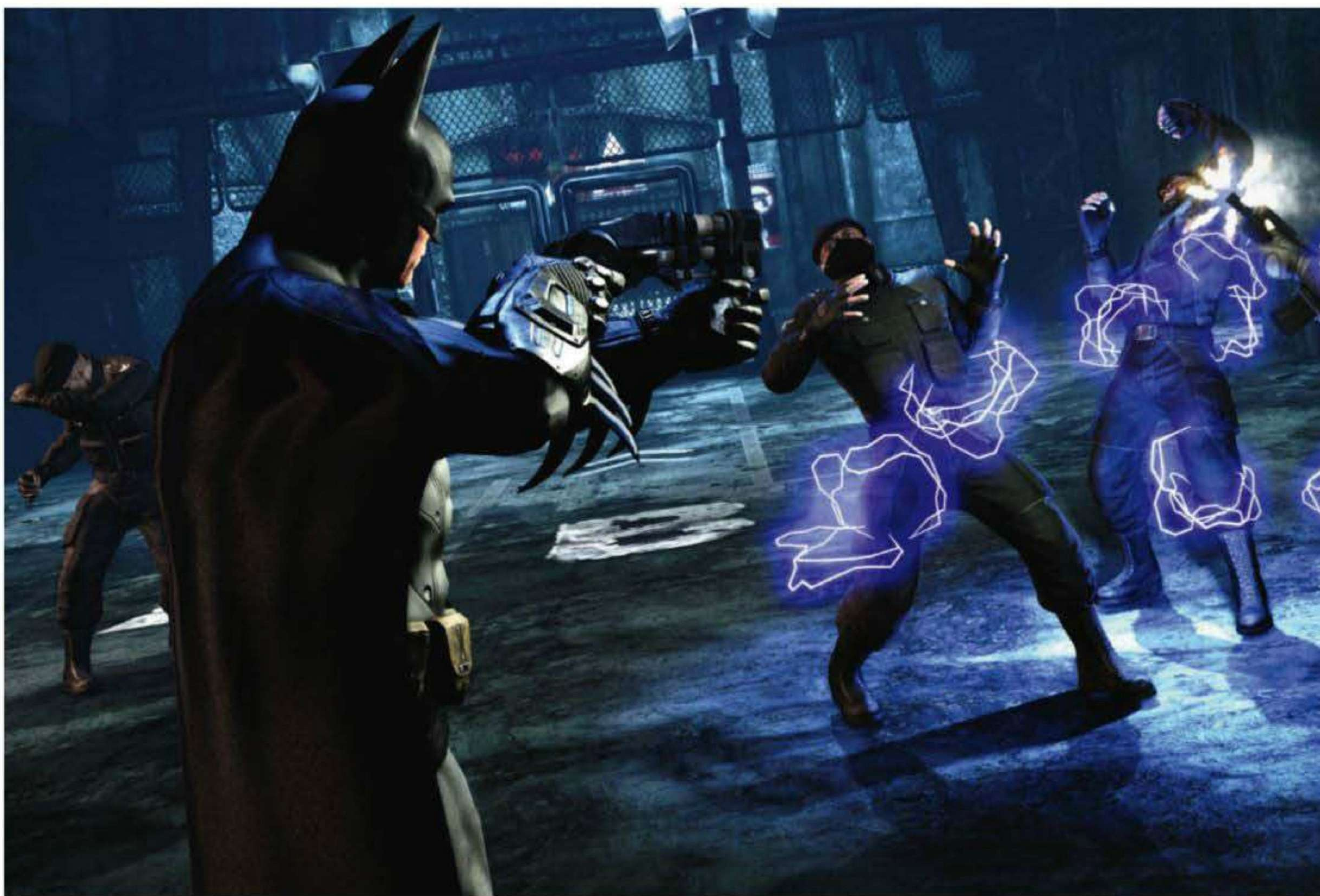
DARK

Can the streets of Gotham match

CITY

the heights of Arkham Island?

Format 360, PC, PS3, Wii U
Publisher Warner Bros
Developer Rocksteady Studios
Release October (Wii U, 2012)



With his cape, his cowl and his smoke-and-trapdoor getaways, Batman has always been the most theatrical of superheroes. It's only right, then, that *Arkham Asylum* should come across as such a magnificent piece of stage management. Rocksteady's first comic-book adventure ultimately seemed so poised, so atmospheric and so comprehensive in its achievements because it chose its props and structured its dramas with such care, limiting the action to a single location and keeping its greatest villain lurking in the wings until the very last minute. It all made, as they say in the trade, for a tough act to follow.

And yet Rocksteady clearly had a plan for that eventuality. And that plan, it turns out, takes the form of another great lift from theatre – although it can also be found in the playbook of the best superhero writers, too. With *Arkham City*, it's time for the unexpected reversal. It's time for the change in scope, and for the sudden shift in scenery.

Arkham Asylum's follow-up keeps Batman just as he was, more or less (new moves aside, he's built from the same mixture of bruising strength and human fragility), but it's inverted his environment completely. The first game's relatively poky madhouse has been plucked from Gotham Harbour and dropped into the rambling streets of the city proper. Concrete replaces carpets, interiors give way to exteriors, and brilliant, focusing claustrophobia is replaced by something that feels almost like an open-world game at times.

It isn't, of course. Rocksteady's far too much of a control freak – and rightly so – to ever send Batman wading through a muddle of procedural generation. That said, *Arkham City* still represents a huge – and dangerous – shift in underlying approach. It's a massive risk, but it's also just the kind of bold move a game that is otherwise built on smart, iterative refinements needs in order to truly come alive. "With *Arkham Asylum*, we were really just focused on Batman," says **Dax Ginn**, Rocksteady's dapper marketing game manager. "So all the chances we took were on Batman: how to make him fresh, how to get into his mindset. It's easy to do combat and

"WE DID FORENSICS AND CRIME SCENES IN ARKHAM ASYLUM. THIS TIME WE WANTED FREEDOM, TOO"

navigation, but we wanted to do stuff like forensics and crime scenes. In *Arkham City*, we knew we could do all those things, so this time we wanted to do freedom, too."

Eighteen months have passed since the caped crusader's first journey into madness, and Gotham's criminal fraternity has found itself with a lot more space to play around in. Quincy Sharp, the original asylum's devious warden, has traded his prison offices for the mayor's mansion, where he's proceeded to ring-fence a chunk of the troubled metropolis in order to create a brand-new no man's land of lawlessness and villainy, as he brings inside the city limits the most dangerous madmen of the DC universe.



It's a move that openly invokes another of pulp culture's favourite late-night touchstones: Escape From New York. And Rocksteady has certainly gone to town, rather literally, on the iconic detailing. Gone are the wind-shaped cliffs and limited perspectives of the first game, and in their place are derelict skyscrapers and rotting brownstones. Snowy streets reach out toward distant guard towers, while the horizon is dominated by sharp steel spires and endlessly roaming searchlights. It's a prison within a prison, effectively: a single fragment of hell frozen within another. Blown up on the big screen at Warner Bros' UK HQ in London – the same screen, perhaps, on which Christopher Nolan once showed the suits an early cut of The Dark Knight – it makes for a tantalising playground. This is the kind of gloomy wonderland that truly needs a hero, a place where Mark Hamill's sickly Joker vies for dominance with a handful of other players, among them Dr Hugo Strange, the new and sinister warden of Arkham Asylum, and his brutally efficient Tyger security guards.

And it's a place in which we find Batman, in the game's latest build, just as you'll often find him in the comic books: perched on the edge of a murky midnight rooftop, waiting and watching. This, above all else, remains Rocksteady's biggest achievement: capturing the sense of an embattled and very human vigilante – a champion with the intelligence to plan his fights before he starts them, spending plenty of time on positioning and strategising and then diving into the fray for a few seconds of swift and brutal violence.

Rocksteady certainly hasn't lost its touch with the violence. In *Arkham City* there are gangs waiting on almost every corner, and Batman's one-hit stealth attacks have been expanded to include showstoppers like the ability to break through flimsy walls to reach targets or to finish off two unwitting goons at the same time with brutal double takedowns. His freeform brawling capabilities have been extended even more dramatically: there are dozens of new animations that see him dancing and spinning around dazed enemies, while a fresh suite of environmental finishers allows him to bust heads against railings or on nearby lamp posts depending on happy accidents of positioning.

Better yet, there's also increased scope for using the tools jangling on Batman's utility belt. Both the Bat Claw and the explosive gel can now be used during punch-ups without the risk of ending a promising combo, the former snaking out to grab weapons from foes or yank them into range, while the latter works as a means of laying impromptu mines. These new techniques quickly become second nature, and they're indispensable.

It's not all about the combat, of course, and in between dealing out head injuries, there are signs that Rocksteady is adapting well to the game's change in scale. This is a bolder environment, and a much richer one. If *Arkham Asylum* had many of the trappings of a Victorian ghost story, take away the stuttering neon signs and the studio has now crafted the perfect Dickensian slum. Cobbles poke through busted tarmac, slime drips from drainpipes and steam bleeds upwards from the sewers. Even the piles of slush shoved haphazardly on to sidewalks are stained a sooty black, while the drifting

The REC weapon is as useful in a fight as it is for puzzle-solving, and just as entertaining to use thanks to some great audio design and all those arcing lightning bolts that send your foes into convulsions





"WE'VE GOT LEGACY BATMAN STUFF, OBVIOUS NODS, AND CAMEOS THAT ONLY HARDCORE FANS WILL NOTICE"

flakes of snow carried on the wind could easily pass for ash.

This Gotham's every bit as steeped in lore as any plain of Azeroth, too. "Arkham's absolutely loaded with Batman DNA," says Ginn. "We've got legacy Batman stuff, obvious nods, and cameos that only hardcore fans will notice. We don't force you to find them all, but if you do come across a few, it makes the world feel more real." And so buildings hold advertising hoardings for Ace Chemicals and Wayne Enterprises, while the ageing courthouse has been mutilated – on one side only – by Two-Face, who has taken it over. Head down the street a little way and you'll find yourself in front of the Monarch Theatre, another local landmark, and a bright waypoint for past tragedies. This is the place where the Wayne family once took an ill-starred trip to see Zorro at the cinema, and where one pulp hero's twilight adventures played a pivotal role in the birth of a successor. Explore Crime Alley, running behind the building, and you can stop to pay respects before a tangle of chalk outlines while the voice of Hugo Strange echoes overhead, pondering the tragedies that made Batman, and those that could undo him.

Getting from one lovingly recreated part of town to another would clearly be something of a challenge for a game that moved at the stoic, heavy-footed pace of *Arkham Asylum*. In response to that, Rocksteady has re-examined its existing mechanics and made a few smart changes. The grapple hop, for starters, has evolved considerably. An Easter egg of sorts in the first game – it was mainly used for showboating moments when you wanted to zip up to a distant ledge and land boots-first on top – it's now been transformed into a move that boosts you right into the night sky, effortlessly attaining the height you'll need for long glides over the game's huge map. Once up in the clouds, you can go into a steep dive too, either terminating in an enemy's septum or swooping back up at the last second to gather more speed to carry you right across town. It's a manoeuvre you'll need to practise in order to truly master, and that only helps to make it such an excellent addition to a game filled with tricks and sleights. "*Arkham Asylum* never needed any of these things," says Ginn, "and that's because navigation was never much of an issue." It's not an issue any more: it's a cast-iron strength. Once you've started to get to grips with your cape's distinctive handling, it makes for a dark treat to swoop, roll and glide through the dripping buttresses of the city, boosting off gargoyles and reeling yourself in with a roving grapple when anything catches your eye.



Batman's new abilities mesh well with a central campaign that already has little trouble keeping him moving. *Arkham City*'s opening hour or so is spent bouncing between a break-in at the mayor's offices and the courthouse, where Two-Face is dangling Catwoman before a kangaroo court, and then over to a nearby cathedral's clock tower that the Joker has obligingly filled with dynamite. The game shifts from fight to puzzle with ease – probably because many of its fights, with their emphasis on hierarchy and placement and on taking out ranged enemies first, are already a kind of puzzle – and from cutscene to undirected exploration with a dogged sense of pace.

More space in the gameworld inevitably requires fresh distractions to fill it, however, and so Rocksteady's trip into the big city has tasked it with finding several new ways of flinging story at players too. Batman can now listen in on enemy chatter over the radio as he monitors nearby clusters of gang members, providing him with clues to everything from shortcuts to side-quests, and he can also interrogate specific thugs, just as long as he can keep them on their feet until the end of a fight – a brilliant move that will temper any desire to button-bash by throwing in something



SIGNAL TO NOISE

Sometimes, a videogame is handed a mechanic so gloriously appropriate that it would be a crime not to use it. Such was the case, clearly, when *Arkham City*'s designers were working on the problem of waypoint markers. Now, wherever you are on the streets of Gotham, if you want to know where the next story mission kicks off, all you need do is look at the sky, where a very familiar signal will be pointing the way for you. It's genius, frankly.

Catwoman comes with her own bespoke combat animations, and a nasty range of moves that befits her villainous origins. Her sub-plot sees her tracking down the asylum's famous inmates' missing loot



After *Gears Of War*, *Arkham Asylum* was the most steroidal of videogames, and Rocksteady's latest promises to build on that tradition – even if some of its brutes are missing limbs



for you to try to protect amid the flying fists and lead pipes.

Meanwhile, the game has grown much wider as it reaches out to make the most of the new real estate, sprouting hours of optional content. Bane, for example, who was not just an enemy but a boss in the previous game, can now team up with Batman for a series of sub-missions that see the unlikely duo tracking down shipments of chemical contraband, but it's the Riddler challenges that promise the most devious strands of additional entertainment.

"In *Arkham Asylum* it was just verbal abuse," Ginn admits. "The Riddler would taunt you, and when that didn't work, he decided to up his game. Now he's laying traps and taking hostages, and forcing Batman to work his way towards a proper confrontation." What originally took the form of a simple collectathon with a few pub-quiz brainteasers thrown in has become a congregation of mini-dungeons spread throughout *Arkham City*: a second micro-campaign unlocked by a mixture of trophy hunting and detective work, where comic-book standards such as electrified mazes and spinning saws await.

Moments like this allow Rocksteady to step away from the game's standard difficulty curve and offer up brutal gauntlets that will require real skill with Batman's gadgets to get through. Fortunately, those gadgets see the return of some old favourites. Rather than having you unlock the more familiar parts of your arsenal again, Rocksteady has decided to rework existing tools, with the justification that Batman will have been rebuilding his equipment while he's been waiting for Arkham City to go into meltdown. Batarangs and explosive gels will behave much as you remember them, but the line launcher (a pinch from the Keaton movies) has been transformed from a simple means of navigating gaps in the floor into something that can be fired off down the street and then repositioned, mid-flight, and fired again, tiny windows of slowdown allowing you to make sudden 90-degree turns if you're sufficiently twitchy.

There will be entirely new additions, of course, and the latest to be unveiled is the Remote Electrical Charge, or REC. A jury-rigged shotgun variant at heart ("It's the only weapon Batman MacGyvers into existence this time around," says Ginn), it grants an instant spark-splattered knockback to foes — or far worse if they're clad in metal armour — and can be used to turn any adversaries bearing weapons of their own into unreliable allies, as they twitch and shudder and convulse after being hit. Machine-gunners will spray wildly when struck, often hitting members of their own gang, and with certain bigger enemies, such as one of the Joker's hammer-wielding lieutenants, the REC's the only reliable way to thin the crowd before landing a finishing blow. In fights it's a wicked delight, but when it comes to puzzles, Batman's new gadget proves equally dextrous, charging up dormant electrical machinery or turning nearby metal into magnets. You can use it to open doors or coax a lift up a shaft by firing at its motors, and it even comes in handy when attempting



CATWOMAN'S INVOKED AS A PALATE-CLEANSER WHOSE MISSIONS TAKE UP ONLY TEN PER CENT OF THE GAME

to extract a steel-encased Riddler trophy that's trapped inside a maze.

As Rocksteady gives, however, it also takes away, and so Detective Vision, which proved too corrosively useful in the first game, has been gently hobbled. While it was possible – even preferable – to play through the entirety of *Arkham Asylum* with it on, it's now great for environmental analysis but not much else. "Detective Vision was definitely open to exploitation in the first game," Ginn muses. "It comes down to the balance of information it offers. Now you'll be able to use it for crime scene investigation, but when you turn it on you lose navigation tools like the compass and waypoints on your HUD, so you won't want to have it on forever." It's become a tool rather than a crutch, in other words: a gizmo to try out when you've arrived at a new location rather than a perk to augment your entire journey.



In a game filled with clever tweaks to existing ideas, Rocksteady's smartest decision has been to expand on the asylum setting rather than ditching it in favour of an entirely new arena. In the first adventure, Arkham was the ideal location for a studio looking to investigate Batman's own precariously balanced psyche: the perfect jumping-off point for those flapping morgue lockers and indoor rainfalls that would shuffle the caped crusader from drab institutional hallways, via the Scarecrow's nerve gas, to platforming challenges built from his own neuroses. Beyond that, though, it was also an excellent means of bringing a universe of villains together without undue contrivance – and, despite the change in scale, that's a trick the sequel wants to pull off afresh.

Dr Strange, as Warden Sharp's unlikely replacement (and as a man who wants to understand Batman before he kills him), will probably bear the brunt of *Arkham City*'s narrative along with an ailing Joker who's fixated with revenge – and that leaves the game with two promising wildcards in the form of the Penguin and Two-Face. Two-Face, of course, is a force of genuine unpredictability, dispensing justice or brutality at the flip of a coin, but it's Rocksteady's fearsome reinvention of the Penguin that shows all the hallmarks of a team hitting a new creative peak.

It's often proved easier to make the Penguin disgusting than it is to make him terrifying; Rocksteady, by the looks of things, has already managed both. He may just be another street-corner kingpin with his own selection of themed goons, but the studio's skill with characters – its ability to offer up iconic elements in a radical new alignment – helps to render him unforgettably villainous. This Penguin's a psychotic barrow-boy rather than a demented aristocrat, clad in a fur overcoat instead of tails, with a nasty woolly cardigan in place of his waistcoat. There's a hint of Bob Hoskins to him, along with a trace of vintage Pete Postlethwaite, and if you look too closely at his Coke-bottle monocle, you'll discover that it actually is a Coke bottle – a fragment of glass presumably wedged into his eye socket during a fight.

Balancing out the forces of evil, meanwhile, is a duo of new playable heroes – the first signs, perhaps, of a case of sequilitis that could potentially grow infected over time. At least Rocksteady seems uniquely aware of the problem. Just as it has cannily refused to give in and grant fans access to a game-unbalancing treat like the Batmobile, it's keeping its newest cast members firmly in check too. Catwoman's invoked as a palate-cleanser whose thievery missions apparently take up only ten per cent of the overall game – which will still amount to around four hours, if Rocksteady's estimates are correct. "We wanted to showcase the way that she's different to Batman," Ginn explains. "So she can stun people with her whip and crawl about the environment with her claws. When you're playing as Batman, you're always doing the right thing. When

Gotham's a city where your goons have to match your theme, and Two-Face's guards – seen here taking a battering from Catwoman – have obligingly scarred their own facial features



THE CAT'S MIAOW

While Rocksteady is willing to cast voice actors who are already associated with Arkham's iconic characters, it generally likes to put its own spin on how its heroes and villains actually look, reworking everything from Batman's armour to Bane's toxic pipework. It's interesting, then, that the studio has opted to pay homage to Adam Hughes' iconic modern take on Catwoman – a design that borrows the face of Audrey Hepburn. It's a classic reinvention of a classic character, certainly, but it still leaves you wondering what the team would have done if left to its own devices.

Bane may be an ally on this outing, but he can still accidentally bust you up when he's lost in the moment during his enthusiastic ram attack

you're playing as Catwoman, it's a chance to do the wrong thing. She's meaner: she targets the testicles when she fights. She's more than a cameo. She's like a special guest star."

Elsewhere, although Robin's present, he's thankfully kept caged within the game's challenge missions – an indicator, perhaps, that this most licence-conscious of developers has realised that when the Boy Wonder pops up, things tend to turn Schumacher. He's still a more interesting piece of work than he should be, however, mutated by some canny after-hours spitballing into a thuggish, shaven-headed street fighter modelled on the UFC roster rather than the circus acrobats that inspired his comic incarnation.

Rocksteady knows that it's Batman who will ultimately carry the game, though – a Batman who has more impact if he's left to work alone, and who has yet again been tailor-made for the control pad just as his big-screen equivalent is regularly pulled from a world of four-colour panels and prepped for life on celluloid.

It's always been like this with Batman. The Dark Knight wasn't the first superhero by any means, but he's the first to have become truly mythical; the first to pass through that strange cultural barrier that allows him to be drastically reinterpreted for each generation – and now, for each hardware platform. After the endless quick-changes of the films, videogames have had their fair share of botched reinventions along the way, slapping that famous cowl on to identikit cinematic tie-ins, or coating the Caped Crusader in the thinnest possible glaze of glossy plastic so he can sulk through a Lego adventure. It took Rocksteady to ultimately do him any kind of justice – and largely because the studio made a game about a specific place and then built the Batman it needed to get the most out of it.

Arkham City is an iterative sequel, perhaps, and one in which most of the pleasures lie in the evolution of the details, but it's also a sequel that hasn't forgotten which part of the design needs iterating, and which details shouldn't be evolved too far. The team's still making Arkham games rather than Batman games, in other words, even if the asylum now lurks in the heart of the city. It still appreciates the value of boundaries and of stage-setting – and it still understands that crucial sense of weakness that must temper strength in order to make a true hero. ■





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Screenshots and art gallery

Q&A: Sefton Hill



Sefton Hill, co-owner of Rockesteady and *Arkham City's* game director

Rocksteady co-founder **Sefton Hill** has been leading development of the studio's Batman games from the beginning. We pluck him from the shadows and interrogate him mercilessly.

How do you ensure a balance of iconic elements and the unexpected in a villain?
When realising these characters, there's never a conscious goal on our part to intentionally create something controversial or unexpected for the sake of it. The process is focused on asking how these characters would actually exist in the 'Arkhamverse', a world which is both fantastical while at the same time remaining believable enough to feel real. Taking Penguin as an example, we felt for him to survive and thrive as a leading gang boss in Gotham City he would have to be an utterly ruthless, nasty piece of work. Although he's sometimes portrayed with a humorous edge, we felt he wouldn't last a week in Arkham City with that attitude. Once we have the core ideas for how this character would look, we then ensure that whatever changes we make, the character is still instantly recognisable the moment you see him. So Penguin unmistakably looks like the Penguin, it's just that when you look a little closer you notice it's not monocle that he's wearing, but the bottom of a glass bottle that's been smashed into his face.

Has the switch from confined location to a larger scale meant that you've needed to tweak more than just traversal systems?
The reason we wanted to move to a more expansive location is that we felt it would fundamentally allow us to increase the feeling of being Batman, and a key part of this was adapting the structure of the game. We wanted to create a city absolutely crammed full of gameplay and story everywhere you turned.

We never had any desire to make the biggest open-world game ever. Our goal was to take the care and attention to detail that made *Arkham Asylum* work, and apply this same philosophy to a much bigger canvas. We feel that it's something that's never really been done before. Most action games fall into two categories – they're either a hand-crafted, tight, focused package or a sprawling open world filled with generic content. We felt there was a really interesting middle ground, with the best of both approaches.

Side-quests like the Riddler challenges have come to the fore – why is that?
This was part of our fundamental design direction right from the start, to create a world full of choice for the player – the choices that Batman would face when stepping out onto the Gotham streets. While we still have the main path storyline – which in itself is actually bigger than the first game – the side missions allow the player to focus on other unique gameplay elements, such as tracking down a serial killer, or forming a fragile alliance with a villain. And because these are not on the main story path, some of these are much more challenging than anything in *Arkham Asylum* because if the player gets stuck, they can always come back later when they are armed with new gadgets and abilities to take them on again. It's this combination of different gameplay styles mixed with concurrent events and stories which gives *Arkham City* a unique feel.

Can you offer a little insight into the hidden room in Warden Sharp's office that teased the new game?
We'd been kicking around ideas for what would happen in Gotham following the events of *Batman: Arkham Asylum* for a number of months and then we hit upon the core concept of *Batman: Arkham City*, which was something we all really liked. As fans, we were desperate to take Batman into Gotham but we wanted to keep the focused gameplay and all the positive elements from the first game intact, and *Batman: Arkham City* felt like the perfect way to do that.

So, before *Batman: Arkham City* was green-lit, we just decided to go for it and add in a load of references for the sequel into the first game and then hope we'd get to make it! Just before we finished we even threw in a couple of pieces of concept art that we had created for *Batman: Arkham City* into that room. There's also quite a few other minor mentions in *Batman: Arkham Asylum* that flourish in *Batman: Arkham City*, but I don't want to spoil anything!

the mis

fits

On the trail of the often-forgotten games that drowned in their own gene pools…





How is it that many of the prehistoric creatures staring back at us from biology textbooks – species that never survived to populate our modern world – invariably seem the most interesting? The world today is a more impoverished place for not having aquatic creatures with five eyes and a long flexible proboscis with a claw at the end. Arguably, the genetic deck was stacked against these oddballs from the moment of their inception.

Fortunately, in the case of videogames (with the possible exception of online titles that depend on active servers and communities), we're able to bring the medium's most genetically obtuse specimens back for another jaunt. As long as there are dusty Sega Saturns on eBay and C64 emulators for download, gamers can once again walk among lifeforms that draw the eye.

It was the birth of the polygon that heralded the first true B-games; titles launched like unguided torpedoes on an unknown audience, lost in a short explosion of retail rubble. Prior to that point, the playing field for developers was too even, in technology and funds, to really segregate games. The difference, often, was a licence, a brand and the means of distribution.

There are many games scattered across the following pages that can't qualify – whether in budget, polish, brand association or otherwise – as B-games. A title like 2003's *Crimson Skies: High Road To Revenge* enjoyed a big budget and a high-profile launch, yet it feels forgotten already. Though there are unique factors to be highlighted in such a case – the teething period and later dissolution of its Xbox Live functionality, for example – it's a sample that reveals how quickly the industry moves, leaving many titles behind to languish in obscurity. The culture of annual sequels breeds an impulse-buy culture that can rapidly wipe last year's model from memory.

So here are 50 games that deserved better than a steep slide into obscurity. These are games that applied for players' affection, but their often head-scratching form or functionality caused them to get lost in the middle of the pile while more obvious (though occasionally less worthy) candidates rose to the top. Some of them are flawed as well as being a little freaky, but by revisiting them we hope to stoke a renewed interest so that you can make your own call. Because ultimately there's a far worse crime than being quirky – and that's being boring.

Realms Of The Haunting

Format PC **Release** 1997 **Publisher** Gremlin **Developer** In-house

The late-'90s console boom and the advent of big-budget survival horror may have had a hand in washing over *ROTH*'s innovative, hybrid gameplay. The fusion of point'n'click puzzling and firstperson action remains formidable, and though *ROTH*'s engine has aged, the quietude of its ghost story atmosphere remains chilling.

Otogi: Myth Of Demons

Format Xbox **Release** 2003

Publisher Sega **Developer** From Software

A bonkers plot involving saving the world from demons played a role in its blink-and-you'll-miss-it retail release, but then the tricky branding might not have helped either... Regardless, the superior, super-powered hack'n'slash in enclosed environments doesn't shy away from turning the screws when your back is to the wall in this beautiful and brutal smash 'em up.

Die Hard Arcade

Format Saturn **Release** 1997 **Publisher** Sega **Developer** Sega

Die Hard Arcade was a victim of circumstance and mixed origins: a port of a Japanese arcade game loosely based on a US movie. Unsurprisingly, such a strange concoction was largely overlooked – but it's expertly paced and makes good on the *Arcade* name with solid pick-up-and-play fisticuffs. There are also some inspired items and environments to stick around for as you duke it out in singleplayer or co-op.

Flower, Sun And Rain

Format DS, PS2 **Release** 2001 (PS2), 2008 (DS) **Publisher** Rising Star Games **Developer** Grasshopper Manufacture/h.a.n.d.

The Suda 51 game that even his most loyal fans have difficulty interpreting (or tracking down). Arriving on DS years after its PS2 debut in Japan didn't help raise the profile of this unusual dichotomy of the fetch-quest that has you relentlessly running errands for strangers, no questions asked. Though the puzzles and lengthy side-missions don't always support the overall narrative arc, they're a welcome, often hilarious, distraction in support of a unique, memorable and downright weird tale.

Seaman

Format DC **Release** 2000 **Publisher** Sega

Developer Vivarium, Jellyvision

Perhaps a little ahead of its time, and too experimental for the mainstream, *Seaman* is a freeform aquarium sim in which you talk via microphone to your man-faced pet. It produces more strange thrills than a horror game, and though voice control is now commonplace, your pet Seaman feels oddly, disturbingly sentient.

Glover

Format N64, PC, PS1 **Release** 1998

Publisher Hasbro Interactive **Developer** Interactive Studios

While the N64 version was adored by critics, the sloppy PlayStation port was hated. With such inconsistency between platforms, *Glover*'s reputation got out of hand. Its clever spin on the action platformer, with bouncy balls a multipurpose, fluid extension of your finger-puppet, provided a shining light in an era of sub-par *Super Mario 64* clones.

The Legend Of Dragoon

Format PS1 **Release** 2001 **Publisher** SCE **Developer** In-house

Taking six months from its Japanese debut to hit North America and another six to hit Europe, *Dragoon*'s staggered international release failed to reach critical mass. With a combat system that incorporates timed button presses (still a rarity in the genre), *Dragoon* transforms the traditionally passive turn-based JRPG into something more immediate and momentous.

Haunting Ground

Format PS2 **Release** 2005 **Publisher** Capcom **Developer** In-house

A game designed as an inverse escort mission, *Haunting Ground* is far from the empowerment fantasy most players crave in their survival horror, leaving it enjoyed by a minority. Your protagonist's German shepherd is the most effective weapon in the game; maintaining a strong bond with the canine through praise and healing actions is crucial to earning his protection and loyalty.

Jade Cocoon: Story Of The Tamamayu

Format PS1 **Release** 1999

Publisher Crave Entertainment, Ubisoft **Developer** Genki

Stranded on PS1, offline and without portability, *Jade Cocoon*'s multiplayer lacked the social element that makes hits of games like *Pokémon*. With character design by Studio Ghibli veteran Katsuya Kondo and a unique minion-breeding system, *Jade Cocoon* is a polished step ahead of the monster-battling game.

The Neverhood

Format PC, PS1 **Release** 1996 **Publisher** DreamWorks Interactive

Developer The Neverhood Inc

Released after the big adventure boom of the

Realms Of The Haunting

Die Hard Arcade

Odama

The Legend Of Dragoon

Burning Rangers

Flower, Sun And Rain

Marathon

Seaman

Big Red Racing

Haunting Ground

The Neverhood

Otogi: Myth Of Demons

Boktai: The Sun Is In Your Hand

Jade Cocoon: Story Of The Tamamayu

Glover

'90s, *The Neverhood* was confronted by an audience that was, perhaps, too well-versed in its mechanics. A striking and creative use of claymation, DreamWorks' game is one of the most visually striking point'n'click adventures.

Marathon

Format: Apple Pippin, Mac **Release:** 1994
Publisher: Bungie **Developer:** In-house

In many ways the spiritual FPS progenitor of *Halo*, *Marathon* is a pacy, furious slice of sci-fi that warrants re-examination due to its blockbuster legacy. A shame it never got the spotlight it deserved on a popular gaming platform.

Burning Rangers

Format: Saturn **Release:** 1998
Publisher: Sega **Developer:** Sonic Team

Burning Rangers turned up to the Saturn party just as it was winding down. The brilliant, bizarre concept of mech-suited, space firefighters is the perfect narrative foundation for the radical and innovative design. There are shades of Sonic Team's earlier work: soaring down fiery corridors and shafts, collecting crystals, evokes *Nights Into Dreams*, while the bursts of speed and action conjure memories of the blue hedgehog himself.

Boktai: The Sun Is In Your Hand

Format GBA **Release** 2003 **Publisher** Konami **Developer** In-house

A game that requires genuine sunlight to slay vampires struggled with an audience committed to the indoors. Beyond the in-cart light sensor lives a dungeon-diver of depth and beauty, blending stealth with puzzles and a unique form of appointment adventuring.

Odama

Format GC **Release** 2006 **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Vivarium

Niche projects were always going to struggle on a platform as ill-starred as GameCube, but the inclusion of a microphone may have been the death blow to *Odama*'s blend of pinball and Japanese history. It provides the kind of delicate cross-breeding that should only be encouraged.

Big Red Racing

Format PC **Release** 1996
Publisher Domark **Developer** Big Red Software

This tooth-rattling racer combined its knockabout physics with Eurocentric humour that bordered, occasionally, on casual racism. Brush aside the cast of international stereotypes, however, and you'll find an arcade racer filled with impact, and colourful courses riddled with strange secrets.



Heart Of Darkness

Format PC, PS1 **Release** 1998

Publisher Interplay **Developer** Amazing Studios

Endless delays and a disconcertingly highbrow title ultimately doomed Eric Chahi's follow-up to *Another World*. This strange and simple tale of a boy and his dog offers one of the most poignant examples of the cinematic 2D platformer at its rock-hopping, cave-diving best.

Psi-Ops: The Mindgate Conspiracy

Format PC, PS2, Xbox **Release** 2004

Publisher Midway **Developer** In-house

Ugly character art and a hopeless case of the inconsequential subtitle conspired to sink Midway's mind-control blaster. *Psi-Ops* maintains a place in history thanks to robust physics and the sharp streak of design malice needed to bring the best out of the Havok engine.

Crimson Skies: High Road To Revenge

Format Xbox **Release** 2003 **Publisher** Microsoft **Developer** FASA

The PC series' flight to consoles struggled in a pre-Drake world that hadn't yet succumbed to matinee adventure. Detailed hub worlds and a smart *GTA* mission system combine perfectly with FASA's golden-age take on the sky pirate life.

Habitat

Format C64 **Release** 1986

Publisher Lucasfilm Games **Developer** In-house

Lucasfilm's dazzlingly ambitious cartoon MMOG simply hit computer screens 15 years too early – although it survives in the form of online world Club Caribe. *Habitat* laid the groundwork for many modern MMOGs, not just in terms of the things it got right, like player avatars and loot, but for the things it struggled with. Lucasfilm's sometimes testy relationship with its userbase, and the team's difficulty in creating enough content, are problems that every Blizzard employee would recognise today – and they probably aren't connected to their fragmented audience through a dial-up modem.

Billy Hatcher And The Giant Egg

Format GC **Release** 2003 **Publisher** Sega **Developer** Sonic Team

Sonic Team's perfect summer platformer was another victim of the relatively modest GameCube installed base – and Nintendo's unremitting grip on the genre. But *Billy Hatcher* is the *Mario 64* formula through the eyes of Sega: it's smart, inventive, colourful and packs one heck of a catchy theme tune.

RTX Red Rock

Format PS2 **Release** 2003

Publisher LucasArts **Developer** In-house

As LucasArts narrowed its focus to Star Wars properties, sci-fi oddities like *RTX Red Rock* struggled to get much of the advertising budget. The Martian environments and stoic cast may not be overburdened with character, but it's fascinating to see LucasArts' adventure template mutating into something more immediate.

Malice

Format PS2, Xbox **Release** 2004

Publisher Evolved Games **Developer** Argonaut

Argonaut's swan song arrived three years later than expected, meaning not even the voice of Gwen Stefani could give this platformer a foothold in a world brimming with shooters. *Malice* might have helped sink one of the UK's most storied development houses, but at least the team went down smacking things with a giant cartoon club.

ToeJam & Earl III: Mission To Earth

Format Xbox **Release** 2003

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** ToeJam & Earl Productions

Ever the bridesmaids, ToeJam and Earl were usurped by Sonic on Sega's Mega Drive, and had to stand in the shadow of Master Chief when they arrived in Xbox form. *ToeJam & Earl III* is one of the purest updates of a 16bit series there is, making the generational hop with the franchise's strange loot, endless wandering, and quirky asides intact.

Rockstar Games Presents Table Tennis

Format 360, Wii **Release** 2006 (360), 2007 (Wii) **Publisher** Rockstar Games **Developer** Rockstar San Diego, Rockstar Leeds

Arriving as a budget sports title sans open-world mayhem, moral transgressions or Rockstar's trademark cinematic flair, *Table Tennis* is proof everlasting of the studio's willingness to take risks. Barebones controls, breathless pace and thoughtful characterisation give the game a veracity and urgency missing even from many modern action games.

Brave Fencer Musashi

Format PS **Release** 1998 **Publisher** Square, EA **Developer** Square

Lacklustre PS2 sequel and a Japanese mobile phone game aside, Square sadly never cultivated the rich world of *Brave Fencer Musashi* into a franchise. A forward-looking action-RPG that seamlessly integrates platforming, minigames, puzzles, realtime combat and a day/night cycle, this *Zelda* challenger brims with great set-pieces and quirky humour.

Aggressive Inline

Format GC, PS2, Xbox **Release** 2002

Publisher Acclaim **Developer** Z-Axis

Inline skates never attained the same kind of cultural cachet as skateboards, and *Aggressive Inline* was quickly overshadowed by Z-Axis' miserably attention-seeking *BMX XXX*. No run-of-the-mill *Tony Hawk* knockoff, the ability to furiously traverse the environments – spinning around poles, vaulting over barriers – gives it a parkour slant that helps it live up to its name.

Jumping Flash!

Format PS **Release** 1995 **Publisher** Sony **Developer** Exact/Ultra

Robot bunny Robbit's firstperson platforming burned brightly but faded quickly, the blocky, pixellated and spare aesthetic ageing rapidly in the face of *Mario 64* a year later. But Robbit's was a bold attempt to nudge the genre into the polygon era, while the bizarre plot and terrific, infectious tunes made the game a 32bit standout. Over 15 years later, firstperson platforming is still a design road rarely taken.

Let's Tap!

Format Wii **Release** 2008 **Publisher** Sega **Developer** Prope

Minigame malaise had long set in for Wii owners by the time *Let's Tap* showed up with its finger-thumping innovations. Equally smart and silly, Prope's game is one of those rare, original concepts that utilises the Wii Remote without making you look a (complete) fool.

Metal Gear Acid 2

Format PSP **Release** 2006

Publisher Konami **Developer** Kojima Productions

Metal Gear Acid 2 arrived just a year after the less refined original, which many series fans spurned for not offering the full-blown stealth action they'd anticipated. The card-based spinoff came into its own with the sequel, though: the punchy pace and sleek cel-shaded looks immediately set it apart from other titles and any instant, damaging similarities to its own series stablemates.

Outtrigger

Format DC **Release** 2001 **Publisher** Sega **Developer** Sega-AM2

Sega essentially abandoned its Dreamcast in early 2001, leaving releases like *Outtrigger* dead on arrival with an audience that was already moving on. *Outtrigger*'s fast-paced, arena-based combat with online play for up to six players deserves credit for its tight mechanics and instant thrills. Toggling between third- and firstperson is essential for getting the best view to a kill in the varied locales.

Mojib-Ribbon

Format PS2 **Release** 2003

Publisher SCEI **Developer** NanaOn-Sha

NanaOn-Sha's games travel better and farther than many Japanese offerings, but *Mojib-Ribbon*'s reliance on calligraphic kanji make this otherwise breezy rhythm-action game a purely domestic proposition. One of the most creative music games from the genre's father, the mash-up of bouncing hip-hop with traditional Japanese instrumentation makes this a rhythm-action jewel.

Tobal No. 2

Format PS **Release** 1997

Publisher Squaresoft **Developer** Dream Factory

The first *Tobal* was best known in the west for its bundling of a *Final Fantasy VII* demo, and perhaps for this reason the superior, slick sequel never made it out of Japan. Designed by *Virtua Fighter* and *Tekken* originator Seiichi Ishii, *Tobal No. 2* is a nuanced 3D fighter boasting in excess of 200 playable characters, unlocked via a vast bolt-on action-RPG.

Little King's Story

Format Wii **Release** 2009

Publisher Rising Star Games **Developer** Cing

Despite originating from the mind of *Harvest Moon*'s Yasuhiro Wada, *Little King's Story* was swamped at market by me-too minigame collections, its distinctive mechanics too far from prevailing fashions to gain a foothold. Brandishing the Wii Remote as a sceptre, the story cherry-picks strategic elements to concoct a wholly diverse, idiosyncratic experience that sustains its length with royal excellence.

Project Justice: Rival Schools 2

Format Coin-op, Dreamcast **Release** 2001

Publisher Capcom **Developer** In-house

Without a standout lead like Ryu or Kazuma, Capcom's college brawler struggled to make an impression, while its comedic slant alienated it from the arcade hardcore. Capcom took to the school theme with bold creativity, and the special moves – including one that summons a squad of synchronised swimmers – are some of the most exuberant and rewarding on the fighting scene.

Body Harvest

Format N64 **Release** 1998

Publisher Midway (US), Gremlin (UK) **Developer** DMA Design

Poor sales didn't help *Body Harvest*'s reputation, but it was DMA Design's future success with *Grand Theft Auto*, under the banner of Rockstar North, that killed chances of a sequel. One of the earliest, bleakest open worlds, in which exploration is hard work (vehicles are essential), *Body Harvest*'s B-movie horde still sends shivers down spines.

Space Station Silicon Valley

Format N64 **Release** 1998

Publisher Take-Two **Developer** DMA Design

Despite being the recipient of many positive reviews upon release, a game about controlling cartoon robot animals via a body-hopping microchip was always destined to be niche. For its clever puzzles, imaginative creature designs and a basic animal ecology that let you goad a polar bear tank and a jet-fuel powered husky into a fight, *SSSV* should always be remembered.

The Legend Of Zelda: Oracle Of Ages/Oracle Of Seasons

Format GBC **Release** 2001

Publisher Nintendo **Developer** Capcom

No *Zelda* games are truly forgotten, but these – Capcom's first attempts at the franchise – arrived at the tail-end of the Game Boy Colour's life. While the pair's major selling point was a password system that meant, upon completion of one title, players could play a subtly altered version of the other (leading to a final boss fight which tied up the story of both games), *Ages* and *Seasons* hold up as *Zelda* titles in their own right. *Seasons* has the better dungeons, but *Ages*' wholesale copying of *Ocarina*'s time-travel mechanic means it better captures the series' classic dual-world structure.

Ecstatica

Format PC **Release** 1994 **Publisher** Psygnosis **Developer** In-house

Let's face it, ellipsoids – as used in the construction of *Ecstatica*'s characters – had even less chance than voxels of stealing the polygon's mid-'90s limelight. A survival horror game that throws two unrelenting stalkers at players (think *Resident Evil 3*'s Nemesis times two) for the entire duration, *Ecstatica* is a relentless, nail-biting manhunt. The oppressive atmosphere is married to some macabre humour, and makes for a disturbing and thoroughly engaging journey and escape.

Cubivore: Survival Of The Fittest

Format GC **Release** 2002 **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Atlus

Animal Leader made it from its native Japan to the US as *Cubivore*, but never reached UK shores. The basic visuals – the result of a last-minute leap from N64 to GameCube – didn't help sell it to a broader audience, despite its undisputable charm. *Cubivore* is an imaginative tour de force, gushing originality like blood from an arterial wound, and there's no shortage of claret. The game's central mechanic – tearing limbs from your cuboid's evolutionary rivals in order to rapidly, and advantageously, mutate – adds a dark twist to your actions and progression. But there's beauty and wonder here, too, in both the delicately animated creatures and lonely, melancholy world.

Battle Engine Aquila

Format PC, PS2, Xbox **Release** 2003

Publisher Atari **Developer** Lost Toys

This off-kilter mech game failed to resonate with the genre's dedicated fans, and the dated-on-arrival aesthetics and character models did little to enamour the rest. Gameplay revolves around large-scale battles in which the player is merely one participant, trying desperately, and often vainly, to influence the tide of each engagement by crippling key enemy structures and units. A gruelling sci-fi war of attrition

Phantom Dust

Format Xbox **Release** 2005 **Publisher** Majesco (US), Microsoft (Japan) **Developer** Microsoft Game Studios

An uncompromising, subversive thirdperson action game that flew in the face of the then-burgeoning Xbox FPS scene. Action and strategy have rarely been such good bedfellows. Having built your weapon-set via card-game-style collecting, the destructible arenas are your proving ground. The slick-but-grim cyberpunk style, punctuated by bursts of colourful, frantic projectile combat, is a bonus.

Breakdown

Format Xbox **Release** 2004

Publisher Namco **Developer** In-house

One of Japan's early experiments with the FPS genre that lacked many of the control and gameplay conventions western players had come to expect, *Breakdown* harnesses the firstperson perspective to deliver a sense of place and self. The camera, conveying your every bob, weave and high-kick, marks *Breakdown* as a crucial genre step towards more athletic action.

Cold Winter

Format PS2 **Release** 2005

Publisher Vivendi **Developer** Swordfish Studios

A mid-tier shooter on PS2 with Euro sensibilities, RenderWare graphics and a celeb voiceover… from Tom Baker. Of course it was forgotten. Scriptwriter Warren Ellis doesn't exactly speak to the FPS crowd, either. Spiritual successors to *GoldenEye* are a rare and misunderstood breed, favouring stunt deaths and panache over noise and gimmicks. *Cold Winter*'s lapse into a humdrum third act suggests that even the most suave shooter should end on a loud note.

Free Running

Format PS2, PSP, Wii **Release** 2007 (2009, Wii) **Publisher** Reef, Rebellion, Ubisoft **Developer** Core Design

A publisher snafu which saw hardly anyone even review the game didn't help, but throw in a wonky camera and strong UK vibe, and *Free Running* was destined to go unnoticed. An uncommonly 'real' free running game from a doomed Core Design which, once you learn to live with that camera, captures the spirit of urban infiltration better than any *Assassin's Creed*.

Urban Reign

Format PS2 **Release** 2005 **Publisher** Namco **Developer** In-house

The critics were a tough crowd for this progressive gang brawler which, across 100 stages, freely searched for what that categorisation actually meant. The 360-degree combat, improvised combos and high-flying weapons you can grab in mid-air are just some of the upshots of Namco's ambition; difficulty spikes galore and public confusion the inevitable cost.

Re-Volt

Format Coin-op, DC, N64, PC, PS1 **Release** 1999

Publisher Acclaim **Developer** Acclaim London

Maybe the appetite for battle racing just wasn't there, or had evolved to anticipate Acclaim's own *Burnout*. Even at the time it felt unfashionable – which to many was part of the appeal. To a tiny hardcore, the game lives on via a PC modding scene. Along with *Extreme-G* and *Aggressive Inline*, *Re-Volt* is one of those stubbornly competent, immensely fun Acclaim brands the publisher literally killed itself to promote, even when the audience just didn't seem to be there. Taking domestic assault courses worthy of *Micro Machines* into chase-cam 3D makes them a whole new kind of perilous, and the track editor (available on all formats) makes concepts like 'Play, Create, Share' look late to the party.



God Hand

Format PS2 **Release** 2007

Publisher Capcom **Developer** Clover Studio

Released at the very end of the previous generation of consoles, Clover Studio's swan-song was unfairly dismissed as a mash-happy brawler dressed in for-the-sake-of-it Japanese esoterica. Its setting – a high-camp, misogynistic, slapstick Old West – obscures from sceptics a rewarding combat system, with user-defined combo strings, dodge cancels and dynamic difficulty.

Rise Of The Triad

Format PC **Release** 1995

Publisher Apogee **Developer** In-house

Released in the towering shadow of *Doom II*, *Rise Of The Triad* would be forever relegated by critics and gamers alike to '*Doom* clone' status. But this Apogee-released predecessor to the testosterone-bolstering *Duke Nukem 3D* is still a solid shooter that sports elements well ahead of its time. Digitised enemies beg for their lives, bullets and missiles leave appropriate, lasting score marks, and the environment is even mildly destructible (well, plate glass windows can be shot out, at least). Maybe the most remarkable thing about *Rise Of The Triad*, though, is that it all runs on a heavily modified version of the *Wolfenstein 3D* engine.

Ferrari F355 Challenge

Format Coin-op, DC, PS2 **Release** 1999 (coin-op), 2000 (DC), 2002 (PS2) **Publisher** Sega **Developer** Sega-AM2

Yu Suzuki's squeezing of a hard racing simulator into gaudy arcade clothing met with contemporary success, perhaps due to its licence, or its still-beautiful visual design. But *Gran Turismo*'s sheer scope would overshadow *F355 Challenge*, and with it a focused love for a car, the sport and gaming itself that sees you cherish even a fifth-place finish.

Kuru Kuru Kururin

Format GBA **Release** 2001

Publisher Nintendo **Developer** Eighting

The best Game Boy Advance launch game features a bright palette that complementes its dim screen and shortform levels tuned for portability. A simple premise – guiding a rotating stick through increasingly intricate and narrow spaces – and the aim to achieve times that flag each level with a star clashes with expectations for bolder ambitions, but today *Kururin*'s a clear grandfather to the likes of *Angry Birds*. ■



AN AUDIENCE WITH...

SEAMUS BLACKLEY

From dinosaur physics to magnetic resonance, there's more to the man who birthed the original Xbox than meets the eye

Devin Sarno

"Everything was pointing art, creativity and maths magical. To me, games are

Early on in our interview – just before he's interrupted by a call from Jerry Bruckheimer – **Seamus Blackley** idly mentions that he's currently restoring a van owned by the physicist and Nobel laureate Richard Feynman, and plans to hand it over to the Smithsonian when he's finished. It's the kind of hobby you expect from a man whose CV already includes high-energy physics and the spearheading of Microsoft's entry into the console business.

Now, as Blackley steps down from his role as an agent at Creative Artists Agency in order to return to game development, we catch up with him to discuss his life in games – and the current state of the industry he helped to shape.



CV

Education: Tufts University (jazz piano, physics)
Employment history: Fermilab (high-energy physics); Looking Glass Studios (*Ultima Underworld*, *System Shock*, *Flight Unlimited*); Dreamworks Interactive (*Jurassic Park: Trespasser*); Microsoft (DirectX, Xbox hardware); Capital Entertainment Group; Creative Artists Agency

How did you get from jazz piano and studying magnetic resonance to game design?

As a really young kid, I saw *Computer Space* at the Clift Hotel in San Francisco. From that moment forward, almost every waking moment I had was spent thinking of ways to make computers play games. It's obvious that's what needed to happen. At my school, we had a timeshare terminal. All my friends and I ever did was program games.

At the same time, though, I was also really interested in playing music, really interested in science and maths, and at that time the other kids' dads worked on the nuclear weapons programmes. They were smart kids, and kids who grew up in an environment in which you'd think up something and then build it, and where the math we learnt wasn't just scratches on a chalkboard, it was alive. You could see it in things. We built rocket sleds, crazy things like that – we did everything we could think of at the same time as we were making games. Everything was always pointing towards that intersection of art, creativity and maths to make something magical. Games are practical magic to me.

Eventually I ended up at the high-energy physics department at Berkeley – and high-energy physics is entirely about magic, too. It's about being able to actually touch the magic that's at the centre of everything, and I became totally seduced by it. Then two things happened: there was controversy around the experiment to find the top quark, and the politics were horrible. And right after that, my post-doc was going to be at the Super Collider, and that got cancelled. So suddenly I had nothing. I had redirected my life towards this thing, and believe me when I say that learning to be a particle physicist is non-trivial.

When did videogames come back into the picture?

The funny thing is that I'd take physics classes and people would believe I was just this uncreative robot. It's exactly the opposite. You're focusing this creative energy on the insane dynamical beauty of the universe: it's exactly the same feeling in game design, which is also exactly the same feeling as playing a solo in jazz. It's a set of rules that seem restrictive but are actually freeing.

Eventually, I saw this ad on the physics notice board that was from Blue Sky Productions, which became Looking Glass. The reason it was on the physics board is because they were looking for someone to fix the physics for a car game. I went over. I started wondering why nobody had just written an actual physical simulation of a car. I wrote what may be the first dynamical car simulation, and then it was boxes you could stack, and bowls, and it became this physics engine, which was a crazy idea at the time. I started to make all these demos that were more fun than games. I had this little wireframe car with a suspension that moved independently, and it could do jumps and tumble. In 1992, this was craziness. It woke up the game designer in me. So I became this huge proponent of physics in game design.

Your Jurassic Park game, *Trespasser*, was presumably where you got to really explore those ideas.

I collaborated with Bill Gates technically and Steven Spielberg creatively. It didn't feel like a big deal at the time. I've been in strange situations where you're presenting, as an amateur, something to people who are at the top of their fields. These guys have a lot of people sitting around just kissing their asses, and it's annoying to them. They just want to do stuff. I just showed up and I had very definite

to the intersection of to make something practical magic"



The 'Raven' tech demo, featuring a dancing robot and companion, was first shown in March 2000 in a bid to demonstrate what Blackley's Xbox would bring to the console gaming world

ideas about what the future of game design could be, and how physics could be used as a tool.

Why do you think *Trespasser* was a failure?
I don't feel bad about tanking *Trespasser*; I feel bad about tanking that entire genre of that sort of game design. We've seen a little bit of it in *Half-Life 2*, and Gabe Newell, bless his soul, thanked us for it, but we haven't seen enough of it. That's something I'm really interested in getting going again, because the power of a game is directly proportionate to the connection that the player feels to the world it takes place in. If that world has a consistent reality that's powerful and interesting, then you have an incredible hold on the player. And it's a real hold. It's not like: here are some cutscenes. If things happening in the world are consistent with everything else – if a dinosaur scares away another dinosaur – you love that. That's the equivalent of the filmic storytelling tool everyone talks about.

I'm pretty sure that, by shipping *Trespasser* before it was done, we chilled all of that out. On the other hand, I was 28 years old and I was getting yelled at by [DreamWorks CEO] Jeffrey Katzenberg, and I didn't have anyone protecting me, so I'll give myself a break. DreamWorks was a movie company rather than a games company, and when you ship a bad movie, it doesn't crash the whole cinema. There was just no adult supervision around.

After *Trespasser*, you went to Microsoft and ended up creating the original Xbox. What happened?
I thought my career was over. It was a horrible thing. I took a job as the programme manager of Windows Graphics. At that time, Sony started to talk about PlayStation 2, and how it was going to replace the PC. I went to see this girl I was seeing in Boston, and on the way back I was screwing with this new laptop I bought, and it occurred to me that the PC had all the tools that people used to make console games, that PC graphics promised far higher performance that what Sony was claiming for the PS2. The only thing preventing us from competing with Sony was standardisation. I wrote up this slide deck on that flight and I showed it to some friends at Microsoft.

I had lost my self-confidence and my passion. I was one of very few heavy-duty programming guys who really believed in artists. On the plane, I found that passion again. It was a really big emotional moment for me. I found it in the thought of making this platform happen – a platform that could meaningfully empower artists. It was an opportunity to make something really great. We started going to meetings we weren't invited to. I had a relationship with Bill Gates already and we used that to get in front of him, and the rest is history.

What do you think was your greatest achievement with the platform?
The thing that makes me happy is that we got Microsoft to do it. That's it. If you told people in 1999 that Microsoft would make a console, they'd tell you it was a joke. And the reason I know that is because all of our partners we went to said we couldn't get it done. One thing that really sticks with me, though, is that after I left Microsoft and went to start an investment company, I went to visit the PlayStation guys and they had made a huge investment into developer support, which no console company would have done before Xbox. That's the thing I'm really proud of.

Drew Angeloff at Microsoft said, "Once you build a console, there is nothing left to do." How did that apply to you?
When I made games, I wanted to force technology and art together, and that's exactly what I wanted with Xbox. Years ago, when I said that the Xbox was a failure, what I meant was that we'd failed to push the business angle. I thought the problem to solve had to do with tools, technology and empowering artists, but there's a business problem as well, and we didn't solve that. So what happened was, outside of *Halo*, nobody had a business incentive to take advantage of the hardware and make something really beautiful and unique. I realised that and said: "OK, the console's safe, I'm going to try and solve the business problem." So for a decade I've been doing that. As an agent at CAA, I've been representing everyone from Hideo Kojima to the Respawn guys, and I've been able to find structured

finance for videogames, look at the intellectual property issues, solve that business problem for some people – and change the behaviour patterns for some publishers. They're getting better games while developers are free to do things they like.

Was Respawn a flashpoint for that? Did Activision see the heads of Infinity Ward as engineers who could be replaced rather than talent that was crucial to the success of their projects?
I can't comment at all on that. But I definitely agree in general that there's been that thought process for a long time. In Hollywood the same thing happened when Pickford and Chaplin split off. People said, "We can replace these guys", and the truth is, you can't.

With the game industry's current fixation on mobile devices and Facebook, if you were pitching to Microsoft today, would you suggest a console?
All kinds of people are releasing consoles. They're called iPads, and Facebook. What's happened is not that the console business has died, it's that it has won. You can't release a device that's not a console now, and if you release one that can't be a good console, it will fail. It's just true.

What this really reminds me of is the early days of the arcades. That era and this era have everything in common. A game had to succeed or fail for a completely casual audience, with no marketing, based on its attract mode or the first 30 seconds of play. If you won, you made 100 million dollars. If you didn't win, you went out of business.

Those arcade guys understand exactly what's going on now: we're in the era of the new arcade. It's something I'm betting heavily on. What's even more fascinating is that 99 cents, with inflation, is pretty much the same as a quarter. It couldn't be more perfect.

Apple seems to have changed the videogame landscape without even trying.
It's not even 'not trying'. They hated videogames. The victory of games is utterly complete with Apple. They resisted it as hard as they could, and they couldn't resist it. It's a total victory.

Does that sting a little? Microsoft put such effort into its Xbox programme, but Apple has won over a much larger audience by accident.
It's different points in history. All of this has to do with the age of people who were born before what Rich Hilleman at EA calls the thin blue raster. If you were born before that, you'll never get it. If you're born afterwards, games have always been a part of your life. As that population ages, all of that stuff unlocks. Our next president will be a gamer. Apple launched [the first iPhone device] a decade after the Xbox, and in that ten years – partially because of the Xbox and a brand like Microsoft or Sony validating videogames – every one of those steps goes towards validating games. It's like a crescendo.

So when Apple turns up, they couldn't do anything about it. They tried! They're still trying. They tried real hard to make the iPad about word processing and music, and the audience just doesn't want it. It's beautiful. The wave has crashed now, and it's now a different problem. You don't have to have a games strategy any more. You need to have a strategy so that your platform isn't disadvantaged in playing games, because gaming is going to be the number one activity on any platform. The highest calling of any digital device is to play a game.

Is this an exciting period or a frightening one, then? A lot of people are saying that blockbuster game development is in serious trouble.
I don't think so. There's a lot of hype that is not very well thought out right now. In my day job, I spend a lot of time investigating the state of the industry: I know all about the economics of this stuff, and the weird thing is, the console business is still growing. I can't figure out what the doom and gloom is. As Zynga gets more audience back for us and introduces people to games, they're doing us a service. They make games simple so people can understand them, but people are going to tire of those games, and they're going to want to look for more.

I can see Gamestop from my office window. I'm reading all these articles about how the console business is dead and everyone's going to go free-to-play. Nobody's ever really made any money from free-to-play, and yet I'm looking at a line around the block for *Black Ops*.

Now that you're preparing to leave Creative Artists Agency, what are your plans?
In November, I got an offer from a major media company to start a studio and work on one of my own IPs. We're going to announce more at Comic-Con. It's a completely new kind of developer that hasn't existed before. It's bittersweet to be leaving CAA. I'm very good at starting things that don't exist, but there are a lot of people who are better than me at running them once they're going. If I'm really honest with myself, it's probably for the best.

What happens after you've got this new studio up and running, though?
Game development is so hard that it tends to keep your interest for a while. You'll see when we announce this, but we're working with quite an interesting format – it's constantly reinventing itself. I believe that the nature of games and the way that the audience relates to designers is in flux. You'll see, when we can finally talk about what this is, that it'll naturally address a lot of trends that are going on in the industry right now. ■

WHO GOES THERE?

With its recharging health and two-weapon limit, DreamWorks' *Trespasser* could feel familiar to those used to playing modern games. Its lack of aiming reticule, absence of hints past the first level, and an object-manipulation system that could see you using five buttons to pick something up put many off. Set at Jurassic Park's Site B, the firstperson adventure, voiced by Minnie Driver and Richard Attenborough, was released to a cool reception, but has built something of a cult following since its release in 1998.



"We're in the era of the new arcade. It's something I'm betting heavily on"

PLAY

REVIEWS. INTERVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess Wii
It might be the one *Zelda* with an identity crisis – abandoning *Wind Waker*'s art style and packing in as many *Ocarina* callbacks as Nintendo could squeeze on the disc – but consider *Twilight Princess* a *Zelda* greatest hits collection and everything falls into place. Hyrule field has never been so massive, and The Lakebed Temple is the Water Temple follow-up our spatial reasoning lobes hoped wouldn't happen.

Tiny Tower iOS
It's nice to feel needed. And trust us, once you've broken ground, skyscraper-management sim *Tiny Tower* needs you: to restock the California Roll in your third-floor sushi bar, to move an adorable pixel-art 'Bitizen' into that final vacant slot in your 13th-floor Plainlake Apartments, to employ a jobless resident in your newly constructed mini-golf centre on floor 15. As you sell goods on your various commercial floors, you earn money to build additional floors until your tower stretches up into the clouds. Oh, yes. This. Is. Grinding.

Child Of Eden 360
Arms well and truly worn out by all that waving, pushing and swirling, it's time to dive in with a controller and gun for those perfect runs. The Trip visual filter, which paints the world in negative colours, makes your battle for Lumi's freedom even more delirious and intoxicating. Peeling back the audio layers of Genki Rockets' vibrant, entrancing tracks is a game in itself.

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE



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Up-to-the-minute reviews and previews

The downloadable solution to the annual game drought

While Microsoft's Summer Of Arcade can usually be relied upon to produce some of the year's downloadable greats, with games like *Trials HD*, *Shadow Complex*, *Limbo* and *Braid* all having emerged from the programme, this year's has got off to the strongest of starts, with Eric Chahi's *From Dust* providing a god game that's not only spellbinding but actually invites players to ponder their particular style of divine intervention (see p100).

And the starring role of an aged, unseen narrator in beautiful isometric RPG *Bastion*, meanwhile, is yet another reminder of the download market's increasingly defined role as the place where experiments are dreamed up and pulled off. On p104 we talk to Supergiant Games about the emergence and development of the concept.



But truthfully, the canniness of the Summer Of Arcade programme – which has produced its fair share of overpriced or just plain forgettable titles, too – has been its ability to whip up some hype during the traditional summer drought, and its function as a counterbalance to the Christmas glut of high-profile retail releases. In this sense, it shows a rare glimpse of the game industry distinguishing itself from the movie business – at the time when, year on year, cinemas are clogging up with major releases and blockbusters, a major platform holder is pushing smaller, weirder and often independently developed titles to the fore.

From Dust and *Bastion* would be essential games at any time of year. But released now, they receive a prominence that would be impossible to match over the coming months. It's a reminder, once again, of the short-sightedness of packed end-of-year release schedules, and of the fact that, in marketing as in comedy, timing is key.

From Dust

Publisher Ubisoft
Developer Ubisoft Montpelier
Format 360 (version tested), PC, PS3
Release Out now (360), TBC (PC, PS3)

A*nother World* creator Eric Chahi's latest is a surprisingly gentle game, given that its vocabulary is built of eruptions and tsunamis, and its founding principle is the chance to see nature working at triple speed. Oceans boil, mountains crumble and, somewhere in the distance, you might just hear the wails of some disciples that you've accidentally set on fire, but you're pleasantly removed from it all – far too high up to feel the true sting of failure, far too powerful to see disaster as anything other than a fascinating setback. Is this what it's like, being a god?

From Dust's dreamy sense of distance doesn't lead to callousness, however. Instead, it's the very thing that elevates the game from a life as a sophisticated genre piece and turns it into something genuinely unforgettable. Short missions, quick restarts and a heavenly sense of separation from your followers allow you to retain a sharp focus on tactics while still finding the room to settle in and just enjoy the business of celestial tinkering. This is a strategy game on the outside, but in its secret heart it's a lot more than that: it's an elemental sandbox, a haunting fish tank, and perhaps even a bizarrely evolved form of painting tool.

Let's talk strategy first. *From Dust* charges you with guiding your amnesiac tribe on an epic journey of rediscovery across a series of bright atolls, volcanic hillsides and dune-speckled flood plains. You move from one map to the next by capturing and building settlements around a series of ancient totems which, in turn, grant powers that augment your basic abilities for as long as your followers can hold on to the territory.

These powers are the sort of thing Moses himself might recognise, allowing you to snuff out fires, conjure passages through water and even destroy matter completely, and they offer brilliant escape options when your more basic abilities – to pick up and deposit lava, water and loose sand – aren't enough. That said, the game's simple triumvirate of elements still has plenty of life to it: lava can be used to form new ridges of rock, which is useful for directing rivers or barricading precarious settlements, sand can raise and lower the ground in fine *Populous* style, while water interacts with the former two as a handy – and often hilariously dangerous – modifier.

On occasion, the game comes fairly close to destroying the dazzling transparency of its own core mechanics, introducing more patently artificial ideas such as a series of trees that behave a little like the turrets in a tower defence game, spitting out sudden bursts of water, say, or allowing you to blast through chunks of solid rock. It's a testament to the developer's restraint that these additions are never allowed to transform your open-ended objectives into mere positioning puzzles. Over time, in fact, they actually come to complement *From Dust*'s brilliantly limited toolset, allowing for a surprising variety of different approaches to each challenge. Some maps ask for nothing more than foresight: tame the environment, set waypoints, and then let your followers do their work in the company of the game's almost flawless path-finding. Others, however, require more direct attention as you hover like a restless parent, vacuuming dangers out of the way as your tribe inches steadily across the toxic landscape.

From Dust's dreamy sense of distance elevates it from a genre piece to something genuinely unforgettable

That would probably be enough, yet the game is so much more than a clever series of geological brainteasers. It's a pocket ecology to be investigated at leisure; a beautiful toy robust enough to allow you to shake it around a bit. God doesn't play dice with the universe, perhaps, but he does like to play Mousetrap, and it's not rare to get halfway through a mission only to find that you've left strategic planning – and the fate of your helpless people – far behind you in order to just mess around with *From Dust*'s uniquely fascinating variables. It helps, incidentally, that the maps consistently bring out the creator in players: a persistent sub-mission encourages you to thrive rather than merely survive, spawning life over the entirety of each level's rocky surface, while later environments beckon you in to tinker by simply offering clever arrangements of fire and water, and inviting you to explore their endlessly cyclical relationship.

Best of all, it's effortlessly dynamic. Sit back and let the world bloom, breathe or burn, as scattered islands slowly connect into archipelagos, and lava grasps fresh land from the sea before tsunamis sweep it away again. The best maps play to this strength ceaselessly, switching you from military tactician to cosmic landscaper and even artist, trimming volcanic calderas that threaten to overtake the map, or dabbing entire mountain ranges into existence in order to hold back floods. It's not rare to start a mission with nothing more than a few handfuls of sand adrift in an ocean, and to end it looking out across an entire continent. Few games can offer this kind of scale and organic growth, few push you towards switching tactics with each rhythmic wash of the tides, and few are as convincing – or as gritty and robust – in their simulations.

The payoff is a god game that's genuinely worthy of the genre's name: a prolonged and intricate rumination on the punishing forces of nature that makes you feel the duty – and the joys – that great power brings with it. *From Dust*'s not magnificent because of its breezy intricacy and rugged grasp of geology. It's magnificent because it's designed with a playful deity in mind. It's built for a god who knows that to succeed is human, but to err – and to be creatively led astray time after time – is truly divine.

9



VOLCANO WORSHIP
Anthropologists may be able to find a certain thematic satisfaction in the fact that Eric Chahi's god game was inspired by mountains with clouds and thunder lurking at their summits, as the developer's imagination was set in motion after years of research into volcanology. *From Dust* has benefited from his investigations – and his numerous trips to active sites – in more tangible ways, too: the game's bubbling magma is accompanied by singularly convincing audio that's been taken from genuine lava floes.



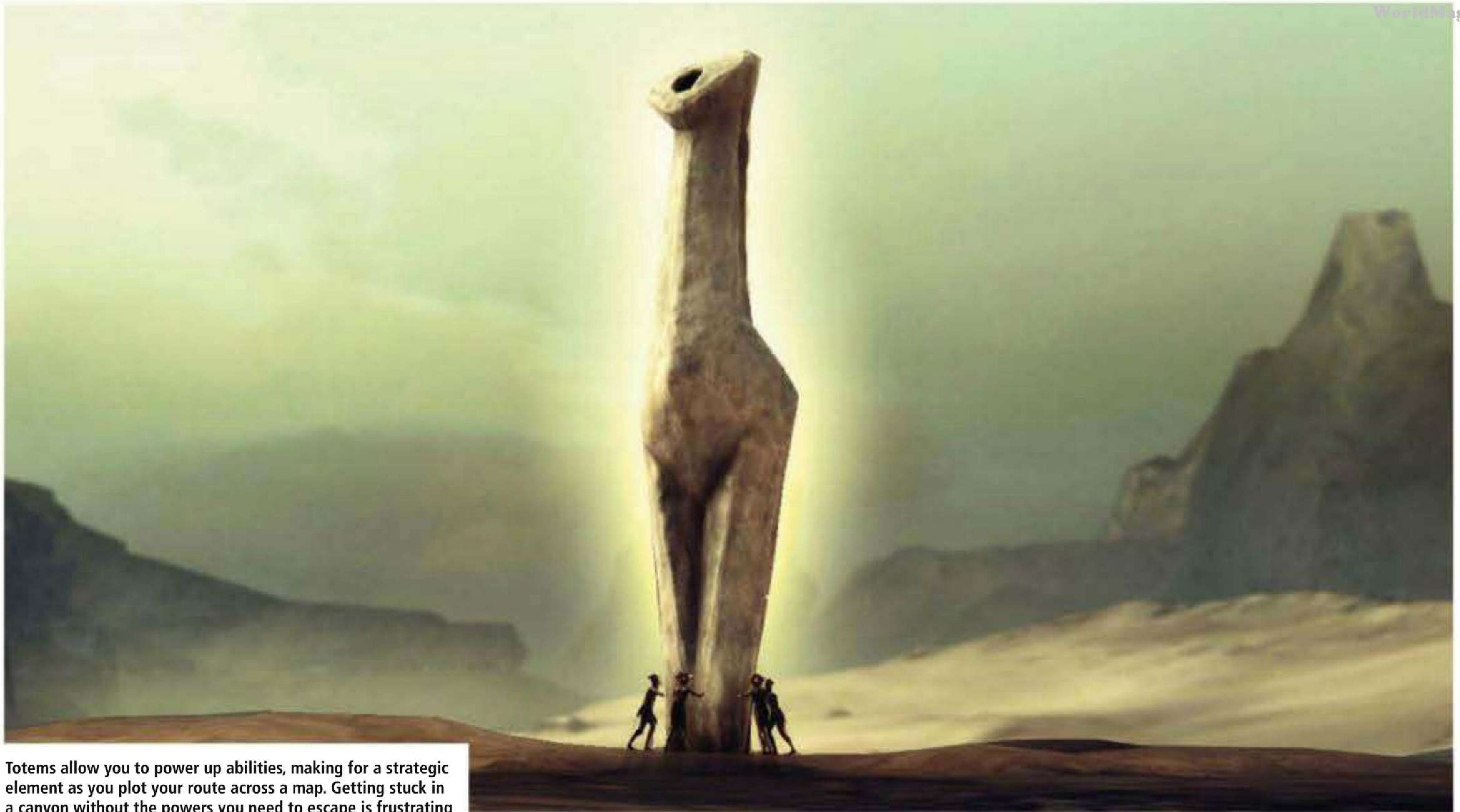


ABOVE Your main means of interacting with the game is by sucking up and then depositing chunks of earthly matter. It's not rare, in the early stages, to do more harm than good as you bury tribesmen under deserts





ABOVE *From Dust*'s fluid dynamics allow for everything from lava floes to swamps, while the landscapes evolve subtly over the course of the game, growing not only far larger, but more unruly. **LEFT** Fires, once started, can be very hard to stop, reducing settlements to ash and scraping the landscape free of fauna. If you lose so many tribesmen that you can no longer found a village, you'll fail a level – but it's a rare occurrence



Totems allow you to power up abilities, making for a strategic element as you plot your route across a map. Getting stuck in a canyon without the powers you need to escape is frustrating

Post Script

In the beginning is the world: what will your god do next?

From Dust is that rarest of all god games: it's the one that wants you to really think about gods. Of course it's not the first of its kind to give you such almighty power, but its primitive elemental preoccupations converge with a handful of early missions that aren't afraid to riff on the Old Testament in order to create an experience that truly makes you ponder the difficult business of religious leadership. Meanwhile, huge, untouched vistas unite with a lonely sense of removal to powerfully reinforce the isolation that must always accompany divine intervention.

Primarily, though, *From Dust* wants you to think about which kind of god you'd like to be. You can scrape through its missions callously with wasteful tactics, broad, brutal choices and nothing more than a weather eye on the horizon to distract you from the final goal. Or you can be a delicate kind of almighty, nurturing your tribe with care as you strive to cover every inch of a map with swaying palms. More interestingly, you can choose to work with the environment or try to fight it.

Can you ever truly win, though? Not really. Ubisoft's deity may be well-versed in trickery, but has been placed into a world that it clearly didn't create; a world where the forces of nature are every bit as powerful as he is – and often a lot more tenacious. In this regard, *From Dust* presents an ecology defined by uncommonly tight symbiosis: an environment in which each system, and each element, has been designed to feed into – and to feed off of – its opposites. Lava, soil and water exist in sharp triangulation. Use them well and they'll allow you to build walls, to raise cities and to irrigate. Abuse them and you'll get flash fires, landslides and floods.

The game's best levels, though, require a god with at least a little ambition – a god who's willing to take nature on and tame it as much as he can. The Emergence level may be *From Dust*'s high point in this regard: it's a mission, built from the simplest of pieces, in which you use the environment to shape the environment. In doing so you can turn empty ocean into a single, unified landmass, or divide it up into a complex collection of peninsulas. It's your choice.

From a raw mechanical point of view, moments like these are opportunities to see how ingeniously thrifty *From Dust* can be: adrift at sea, your only hope of building a tiny cluster of sand dunes into useful real estate lies with lava pouring from the volcano that steadily throbs at the centre of the map – the same volcano that will eventually finish you off if you don't work quickly enough. But taking the design as a whole reveals nuance as well as cleverness. Who are you, god? Are you going to work quickly and carelessly, constructing barren roads that just about let your tribe hang onto their own existence, or are you going to work generously, creating a system of lush fields and broad causeways?

If you were a god, would you be an engineer or an artist? These aren't questions you necessarily expect from an RTS, but they're present in every choice to pick up a lump of lava and either paint the geography in with an eye on the final look, or roll it out like you're laying concrete. And it's not the only query, either. Are you fixing the world, or are you just passing through? Are your disciples your tools, or your prize?

From Dust has its fair share of meters and metrics. It tracks how much backstory you unlock, how many challenges you've completed and even how much vegetation you've left behind. It doesn't have a morality meter, though, and it won't monitor your bias toward haste or aesthetics.

That's ultimately because it doesn't need to. In Ubisoft's ever-shifting worlds, action is character and, as a deity, your choices will be made without reproach. But not without consequences. Your tribe's fate may lie in the heavens, after all, but the measure of their god remains written in the earth. ■

Bastion

Bastion is a game about rebuilding a world, a game in which every step you take sees a lost landscape flinging itself back together around you, as fragments of paving tile and shards of scenery spin upwards to meet your passing feet. It feels like a magic trick, but it's not. The real magic trick lies with the other defining feature: narration.

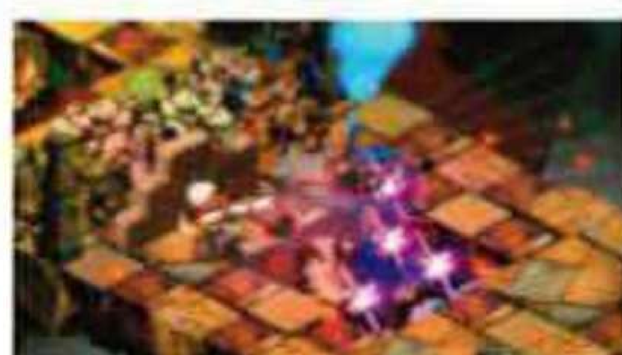
That's because *Bastion* is also a game about the spoken word, a game in which one of the NPCs isn't just there to dole out the waypoints, shuffle you towards the next fight and keep the potions flowing, but to link the worlds of the couch-bound adventurer and his silver-haired onscreen avatar by detailing his exploits as they happen. It's pure sleight of hand, dazzling and disarming: a complex latticework built from simple sentences and triggers, and then drawn together by your choices. Brilliantly – and this is a game of a hundred glittering brilliances – *Bastion*'s monologue doesn't just react to the big, world-rupturing decisions that occur towards the end of the adventure, but to your moment-to-moment fancies at every step of the way. Which of the dozens of onscreen enemies to shoot first, when to opt for a ranged or melee weapon, whether to glug a tonic, go on a rampage or accidentally fall off the lip of this half-finished universe: nothing escapes the narrator's eye. He never repeats himself, and yet he never lapses into prosaic football chatter, either. You can put thoughts of Hansen and Gray presiding over the isometric pitch of this sprightly action-RPG aside: this is about pummelling one swarming monster into the next in the company of a whisky-voiced American ancient who shares his numinous hillbilly wisdom whenever the moment pleases him. "Words can't express what happened," he says on one occasion. "But they're all I got."

He's a confidante rather than a commentator, and so it's not so much a victory for storytelling as it is for basic emotional resonance. Strange as it sounds, you shouldn't expect the voice in your ear to untangle *Bastion*'s plot for you (truth told, it's still a thick fantasy snarl, albeit an unusually earnest one). Instead, it will bind you tightly to the unfolding action, weaving a conspiratorial spell that creates an unexpected intimacy as you move from distanced lock-on fire to more immediate button mashing. By the end of *Bastion*, you'll feel far closer to the game than you might have expected. You'll be invested in its outcome in a way that, say, merely understanding what's going on could never have achieved.

The narration, in other words, helps to push you inwards as well as onwards, shoving you deeper into a game that is, in every way, worthy of such an eminently pinchable conceit. Each mission in this dungeon-crawler drops you face-first into a new environment, some made of long grass and mutant flytraps, others built from hippyish kibble like leopard-print throws, beads, and even stray sofa cushions. It's a compact journey, but still an epic one, and the gravelly mysticism combined with the delicate autumnal art suggests an unlikely but potent creative partnership. Other fantasies may lead you to the same old reskinned Mordors; *Bastion* resembles a trip through a garden centre managed by Tom Waits and Alphonse Mucha.

Publisher Warner Bros
Developer Supergiant Games
Format 360
Release Out now

This is about pummelling one swarming monster into the next in the company of a whisky-voiced American



GROUND POUND
Bastion's densely crafted adventure should be more than enough to satisfy most dungeon-crawlers, but the team at Supergiant has also provided a series of optional Proving Ground missions, based around mastery of each of the game's weapons. Since those weapons happen to be excellent, chances would already be high that the Proving Grounds are too. In truth, however, the team outdoes itself, opting for mechanical invention as often as it chooses to send in waves of enemies. You'll master the shield by killing foes without a firing a shot, for example, and learn the intricacies of the pistol by taking out turrets while advancing across a collapsing bridge.

The systems are equally delightful, all of them built upon the bedrock of the Bastion itself, a refuge island that you're helping to reconstruct, piece by piece, with every core or shard of the old world that you recover from each of your missions. It's a hub, then, but it's also a complex system of personable micro-rewards that sees you steadily adding characterful trimmings like pets and even a mailbox, as well as more useful features: a shrine that lets you invoke gods (like *Halo*'s skulls, they work as combat modifiers), a lost-and-found where you can buy items, and a memorial providing side-objectives.

In fact, Supergiant Games takes the metaphor to its full extent, with every last RPG mechanic at your disposal represented in wood and stone. Switch loadouts at the arsenal, upgrade weapons at the forge (each choice locks another out, *StarCraft* style), and manage your levelling in the distillery, where perks have become bottled spirits. They're a familiar, if reliable, bunch with boosts to the likes of health and critical hit percentages, but they come with beautiful doll's house designs and clever names, like Stabsinthe.

Weapons turn out to be the game's final victory, which is useful since *Bastion*'s short missions are crammed with enthusiastic blasting and bludgeoning. From the starting hammer to some of the final, explosive options, each weapon is distinct in handling, impact, and flavour of damage, and each brings with it its own range of special moves. Both mortar and flamethrower options are among the best you'll find in any RPG, while the game is forced to ensure an uncommon sense of balance among everything from pike to pistol, since you can only swap equipment at certain points in each level.

Bastion's ultimately more interested in variety than challenge, and that's the right choice for a saga like this, particularly when it leaves you with a New Game Plus option and all those gods to experiment with next time. In reality, though, bribes to replay are unnecessary: even though this is at heart a standard action RPG – albeit an extremely refined one – as the early missions' drifting blossom is replaced by ash and eventually snow, it's frightening to think how much the human voice has done to distance *Bastion* from the crowd. This is a game built from great art and clever mechanics, but it's an adventure born of both deeds and words.

9

ABOVE Boss fights are plentiful but inventive, each showcasing a new weapon in an unexpected way. You'll track this giant lizard through a swamp for a long time before you get the right tool you need to do damage to it.
LEFT Environments are varied, but all share a painterly eye for detail, and a quirky sense of style. Towards the end of the game, the adventure grows in scope and grandeur, but the human touch always remains



BELOW The narrative is ambitious for such a compact game, offering flashbacks, dream sequences, and plenty of room for personal interpretation of the plot points



ABOVE Everything can be smashed, whether it be for currency, spare tonics, or for the sheer joy of destroying things. Once you have opened up some of the later weapons, the game becomes truly combustible



Post Script

Interview: Greg Kasavin, creative director, and Amir Rao, studio director, Supergiant Games

Nominated for two awards at this year's Independent Games Festival, in the visual art and audio categories, Supergiant's debut owes much of its power to its unique approach to storytelling: you're joined on your quest by an omniscient narrator who sees your heroics as a jumping-off point for backstory and rough-hewn philosophy. We catch up with the studio to find out how such a charismatic concept came together.


Greg Kasavin


Amir Rao

How did the idea of the narrator come about? Did you have any idea of how much it would come to dominate the experience?
Greg Kasavin: It's not an aspect of the game that was there from the beginning. The narration was something that Amir just tried one day in the course of prototyping. The game spent about nine months in the prototyping stage, and Amir had this friend called Logan Cunningham who's our narrator. He was just living in New York, and Amir had him record a few lines, and put them in the game just to see what that did. We originally had a text-based dialogue system, and predictably, it was kind of slowing down the pace. As soon as the voiceover went in, it was pretty dramatic. From there, whenever it wasn't in a part of the game, we kind of missed it, so it ended up being pervasive. It also supported our narrative goals.

From the start, we wanted to make a game that was fun to play, and that felt personal. It allowed us to have that without interrupting the story. As for whether we knew how much it would dominate, I don't think there was any way we could know what a big deal it would become. As with the rest of the game, it came from a problem-solving mind-set.
Amir Rao: We didn't realise until we started to debut the game what kind of an impact the narration would have on people. It was pretty surprising.

As the narration evolved, did you realise it could be useful for more than just swift storytelling?
GK: Yes. It became a crucial tool for involving the player in the little things that are going on, as well as feeding back to them what should be important to them at each moment in time. So many games really struggle with exposition and trying to get you to care about things that are happening offscreen or in the past. Often that happens in a cutscene, and players can very easily tune that out. But we found that having a narrator talk to the questions that are of concern to the player in each particular moment seemed to have the strongest impact. That said, we definitely didn't want to remove any ability for the player to interpret the story for themselves. I think the reason why narration as a technique tends to be unpopular is that people are most used to it in films, and in films narration is often pretty terrible: it's just a crutch to reveal the subtext of a scene. In our case, I think it works pretty differently.



Did the narration change much over the course of the development? Was it a tricky technical hurdle to overcome?
GK: You'd be surprised. We found his voice almost immediately. There were a handful of lines of dialogue used as his test, and by the time that narration went into the game, we had a strong sense of the tone we wanted. As soon as the technique itself showed promise, we found the character's voice in the space of about a week. Based on what we knew about the character, his speech pattern just evolved from there. If anything, we were surprised by how many of our original lines survived through to the end of the project.
AR: In terms of the implementation, what was really useful is that, as we were recording lines over a long space of time, we got to observe what people were actually doing in the game during long playtests, and we got to actually write towards that. We had our own things that we anticipated, but people will always surprise you, and that allowed us to be more reactive. In putting it all together, we had a lot of different triggers, in terms of weapons, say, or doing certain things at a certain time in a certain area. We needed to basically create many, many of these triggers to represent accurately what was going on at any moment. No lines should repeat on a single playthrough, so we have a lot of alternatives for each system. Putting it together was all done by hand: all the timing, all the spacing between different lines depending on whether the player was going fast or going slow. All those things we just had to craft. It took a long time.
GK: It was time worth taking, though. Given the high quality of Logan's performance, and given the sense of immersion the narration was providing to players, we had to make sure the timings on everything were exactly how they should be.

Did you investigate the ways that sports games handle the same kind of issues when they're creating commentaries?
GK: We didn't play the game with a copy of *FIFA* as reference for us, but we definitely looked at how other games tackle these issues. One of the games that Amir brought up early on was *NBA Jam*, where there's this entertaining sports announcer. You score a shot and he says "Boom shakalaka!" and everybody remembers it. We knew if we did it right, we could have something people remembered like that! ■

Catherine

Catherine is at its core a game about the nature of love, commitment and what 'forever' means when it's past time to grow up. On the surface, however, it's about choosing between two beautiful women – featuring the shabby sort of protagonist that always seems to end up with that particular double-edged dilemma.

Vincent is a gangly, mop-headed and perpetually dazed 32-year-old whose primary interest seems to be drinking with his friends. We never see his job, but he's implied to be a systems engineer without much upward mobility. He lives alone in a studio apartment where the rubbish always needs putting out. Katherine, his girlfriend of five years, is poised and ambitious, fulfilled by her work at a clothier. She starts hinting that she's ready for marriage; Vincent, on the other hand, wonders why things just can't stay the same.

While Vincent is drinking away his anxiety around Katherine's new agenda, an attractive young woman appears, as if summoned by his indecision. She's Catherine-with-a-C, and she very quickly becomes trouble for the story's decidedly unheroic hero after he drinks too much and wakes up next to her in bed.

By day, Vincent hangs out in the Stray Sheep, a regular haunt for him and his friends. Here, he gets his pals' take on his evolving situation and can talk to strangers with similar burdens, and not so similar – rumour has it that there's a curse killing off men who cheat by attacking them through their dreams. Vincent's circle of friends is interesting and believable: cynical Orlando scoffs at the institution of marriage, apparently having been hurt in the past; young Tobias is eager to hook up with Erica, the Stray Sheep's comely waitress; and reticent Jonny is apparently dating someone about whom he never speaks. These sequences are largely scripted, although there are regular dialogue options. Beyond a cutscene there's no obligation to hang around in these sections, but doing so adds much to the story, as you walk around the bar and talk to patrons who come and go as the night goes on.

During these bar scenes, players receive text messages from Katherine and Catherine, and can choose from various reply options. The mobile phone, which also accesses the menu and saves, is a canny recognition of the role digital communication increasingly plays in romance and intimacy – Vincent won't look at some of the photos Catherine sends in public.

By night, Vincent's consigned to his nightmares, frightening sequences in which he's crowned with ram's horns and joins other terrified sheep on a journey that forces them to climb block towers or die. Vincent generally has to complete three stages of these puzzles, scaling the stacked towers by pushing and pulling blocks so that he can climb upwards before the falling base of the stage catches up with him. Blocks with different properties – some are immovable, slippery or can break – make the task tricky, though special items, like an energy drink that allows Vincent to climb two rows at a time for a short period, can help. Each night's final stage features a lethal menace in pursuit of Vincent, and these bosses are laudable for their truly nightmarish construction. One, a giant infant that crawls after him calling things like "Daddy, don't kill me" is particularly chilling.

Publisher Atlus
Developer In-house
Format PS3 (version tested), 360
Release Out now (US), TBA (EU)

A giant infant that crawls after Vincent calling things like "Daddy, don't kill me" is particularly chilling



The block puzzles' rules are simple to learn, but even in the game's easiest mode they often frustrate. Though they at first seem to be logic puzzles, the nightmares mainly require speed, reflexes and multiple attempts in order to succeed. Victory always feels hard-won, never random or lucky, but most of the time these sections are more punitive than fun.

The decision-driven storyline and its Twilight Zone-ish mystery framing is enough of a motive to persist, however. *Catherine*'s story offers so many dialogue choices that its presiding arc is subjective: some players will see in Vincent a lazy oaf who wants to get away from his devoted long-term girlfriend; others a henpecked slacker who's revived by someone young and fun; and others will play a weak, indecisive guy who wants to do the right thing but hasn't got the bravery. Every response moves a needle on a meter – selfish or noncommittal answers take you toward a wicked red, while being temperate or generous edges the needle to a blue zone, and though their short-term impact on the game is limited, your decisions eventually culminate in one of eight endings.

Though Katherine is a nag, Catherine trips the 'crazy girl' alarm, and Vincent is ruining everything, the storyline shies away from outright judgements – players can take their own view. In one of the game's most fascinating touches, an unseen tormentor in the nightmare regularly asks Vincent yes-or-no, this-or-that questions, like whether it's OK to lie if no one finds out. Give your answer, and you'll be shown a pie chart breaking down the responses of all other players thus far. In a game that invites you to wonder whether long-term monogamy is a realistic aim, seeing how many people would lie if they thought they could get away with it is starkly revealing. The questions posed are subtle enough to invite you not only to wonder how Vincent will answer, but how you would too.

So the puzzling is a let-down, and the story takes some weird turns later on. Even so, *Catherine* is unusual, startlingly innovative and engaging. Its nuanced storytelling offers something few games have been able to meaningfully achieve – true conundrum, with little indication from the game telling you what you're supposed to do to be 'good'. Frustrating, beautiful and bizarre, *Catherine* stays with you.

7



RIGHT The curls of Catherine's hair suggest the sheep's horns worn in Vincent's nightmares. **BELOW** Visual cues link the story of the nightmare world's doomed flock of sheep with the life troubles of the bar patrons Vincent chats with during his daytime drinking





ABOVE Vincent can have different interactions at the Stray Sheep depending on how long he stays and drinks. Boozing will help him move more quickly in the nightmare stages, so it's to his advantage to get lashed



Japanese animation house Studio 4°C (Spriggan, Tekkon Kinkreet) lends its talents to *Catherine*'s cutscenes. The story itself is framed as a Masterpiece Theater-style show called Golden Playhouse



The nightmare sequences feature musical arrangements by *Persona*'s Shoji Meguro

Post Script

Catherine's exploration of adult relationships should have stayed grounded in reality

Warning: this section discusses major story details and therefore features spoilers.

From the moment it was announced, *Catherine* has enjoyed an unusual level of interest, not just because of its uniquely eastern strangeness, or its overt sexuality, but because it promised a game with genuinely mature adult themes.

Catherine's artwork might be shamelessly sexy, but players expecting any degree of explicitness will be disappointed. And it's for the best, as the game is more mature for the way it displays what happens between adults as private and understated – leaving fan service and breast-ogling to teenage boys.

The character of Catherine represents limitless temptation for protagonist Vincent, and the game understands that an early-morning vision of her gold-ringed head on his pillow, or the way she sips cherry-garnished martinis, is more effective at communicating this than any gratuitous imagery. But in Vincent's nightmares his subconscious is allowed to speak louder than life: the most explicit image in the game isn't naked Catherine herself, but the Immoral Beast, a grotesque, groaning monster, all spread thighs and tongue, that pursues him through his dreams: unchecked lust become repellent.

Catherine, then, isn't 'mature' because it's about sexual affairs or because it depicts adults drinking and smoking. It's mature because it portrays a world where these things are simply part of life, alongside the many other modern-day needs and insecurities of mature men and women lingering in career uncertainty and commitment aversion, ambivalently free of the work and marriage paradigms to which their parents unquestioningly adhered. *Catherine* might be depicting America through a Japanese filter, but its concerns are universal.

That's why it's disappointing that *Catherine* can't stick to being a natural drama, in which the events of Vincent's nightmares would never require any explanation other than dream-madness. The idea of a 'witch's curse' that strikes cheating men and kills them makes for a fun background spook, and it's true that seeing recognisably clothed sheep in the dream worlds – whose real-world counterparts vanish as they fail their trials – is a haunting effect. But the nightmares' dark absurdism isn't just symbolism for inner torment, it turns out, as the plot ultimately identifies a supernatural perpetrator. There really is a curse, and Vincent is being punished for his wandering eye by a diabolical overlord who makes him climb towers in his dreams. Old-school block puzzles seem a surprisingly fitting metaphor for a troubled mind, but are less interesting when they cease to be just a part of Vincent's subconscious and become a more literal gauntlet from yet another videogame villain.

That so much of *Catherine*'s narrative can be boiled down to witchcraft doesn't entirely detract from its enjoyment, and it's fair to say that supporting a strange narrative with a supernatural undertone doesn't necessarily make a story childish or less relatable. But in *Catherine*'s case it feels a little cowardly, a concession to the belief that players won't get scared unless someone's literally breathing fire, or that all darkness in a story needs to have followed a tangible trail from hell. *Catherine* employs fantastical symbolism, with visual roots in folklore and the Bible, and those elements could have remained abstract signposts of Vincent's angst to great effect.

With its nuanced portrayal of adult relationships, and its realistic painting of the concerns that come with being a grown-up, *Catherine* confidently explores what, in gaming, is all but uncharted territory. But it's at its best when it's about a man's struggle with himself, because genuine maturity means knowing that life can be frightening enough. ■

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Trenched

Trenched is a mongrel game, a union of mech action and tower defence that both rises above and falls somewhat short of its competition. Its ingenuity lies in the 'mobile trench', which contains the two defining elements of a Double Fine game: the character and the joke. The game opens after an alternate World War I in which an otherworldly force called The Broadcast brings a sudden leap in technology, allowing soldiers to walk confidently across the battlefield on giant robot legs while still hiding in their trenches. It's a deft visual gag that might have sold *Trenched* to a wider audience had its gameplay not drawn liberally from strategy and tabletop games.

Indeed, half the fun occurs between missions, where you're free to customise and decorate your trench. Looming above your battleship command centre, it visibly reflects new upgrades; its legs sprouting six terrifying Razor of the Gods machine-guns, or perhaps a Wave Disturbance Prototype that causes 'deathsplosions'. Each successful battle yields XP that opens up more sophisticated upgrades in the shop, and most also present free upgrades as loot boxes collected in the field. *MechWarrior* fans and gearheads will feel instantly at home in this modular sandbox, with its three chassis types and six weapon classes. Between short- and long-range guns, explosive and energy weapons, and specialist battle or building trenches, the tactical variety at first seems satisfyingly deep.

Played alone, *Trenched*'s promise is only partially met on the field. Your trench, again, puts its best foot forward, with cannon delivering a fearsome report and legs convincingly pounding the ground. You walk at a glacial pace and cannot fly; your sole advantages are firepower and foresight, and you must use them to defend several military installations on multiple fronts against the attackers, TV-based enemies cunningly named 'Tubes'.

Arriving in finite waves, some Tubes attack bases, some destroy your static defences, and others charge your trench; some attack from afar or by air, some are tiny and hard to hit, while others are factory-sized. You must rethink your approach to these threats from wave to wave, and according to your loadout. Breathlessly moving from point to point to rescue each base, often in the nick of time, you will curse the weight of your otherwise omnipotent trench. Without the ability to zip freely about the field, you must multitask – which is where 'emplacements', or defensive towers, come in.

Slain Tubes will drop TV sets that pay for emplacements, and you scramble to grab these in the seconds before the next wave. Paint the ground with crosshairs, and an emplacement comes shooting from the sky and burrows into the earth. You're free to put emplacements wherever they'll fit, which brings forth more questions: do you fortify a base with guns, or cripple Tubes at their doorstep with mines and dampening generators that slow their advance? Can you afford to place a dedicated sniper or flak turret, when your basic defences could use an upgrade? And should you even bother with the repair crane that quickly heals you?

These questions are ultimately short-lived, as *Trenched* lacks the tight balancing of a dedicated realtime strategy or tower defence game. Compared to a walking mech with at least one ranged weapon, dedicated sniper and flak turrets are of limited use against faraway enemies. Dampening generators don't delay Tubes as much as you can yourself. At best, turrets buy you time as you race to clean up the next mess. You never make a truly difficult tactical choice, because you rarely need to rely on your defences, and probably shouldn't: even a fully upgraded mortar turret seems less potent than an assault chassis toting magnetic grenades. Boss battles, which close each of the three stages, render turrets even more extraneous.

'Tower defence' is something of a misnomer here. Few levels require you to deploy emplacements optimally, with just a handful presenting distinct pathways for a gauntlet. The rest, set on wide-open beaches and murky mountainsides, privilege organic chaos over organisation. Most critically, *Trenched* doesn't provide an overhead map or radar – giving you no ability to instantly assess the state of your bases and defences. Your knowledge is limited to what you can see on the ground, and offscreen indicators and verbal cues from your commander are inconsistent as well as being of little help. Without a tactical battlefield view, you'll naturally take the run-and-gun strategy. The action remains furious and fulfilling, if undermined by cheap shots on occasion, such as an 11th-hour flank attack that triggers no corresponding visual or aural cues.

Play the game with a friend or three, and you can overlook most of these design issues. Lacking radar, players can simply park their trenches by different entrances from where they can divide and conquer each wave, some picking off Tubes with machine-guns and others clearing the remainder with artillery. Some might risk piloting an engineering chassis and scouring the field for turret sites, while their squad hunts stray Tubes. And there's just something about piloting bipedal war-machines that inspires camaraderie.

However, with only 15 campaign missions playable solo or with friends – and no survival mode – *Trenched* won't last long. Ultimately, the game's underlying sense of humour and its obvious affection for giant robots save it from feeling ordinary, but its favouring of trenches over tactics makes for a competent mech game with extra flair rather than a completely seamless genre blend.

7

Publisher Microsoft
Developer Double Fine
Format 360
Release Out now (US), TBA (UK)

As much as Trenched seems to have been built for multiplayer, its 15 campaigns won't last long



TRENCH FOOT
Four marines are available as player avatars: three battle-hardened soldiers and one blithe, tea-sipping Englishman. For a Double Fine game, *Trenched* is inconsistently written, occupying a grey area between satirical and solemn. Its fantastical backstory is full of pulp, but the two crippled war veterans representing good and evil – the bedridden Frank Woodruff and the insane Vladimir Farnsworth – seem a shade too disturbing for a comic romp. Unskippable cutscenes serve to introduce new enemy types, and Woodruff and your marine both remark ceaselessly on the differences between Tube species and trench weapons. It can feel like playing a tutorial that never ends.



ABOVE Treasure the sunny beach level, because *Trenched* loves to douse you in clouds of gas. The bleak environmental design may echo WWI, but it's not much fun







ABOVE LEFT Rampaging Breakers are one of the game's more interesting sights; blow off their armour with an explosive and they reveal a scowling visage of snowy television screens, charging recklessly into the future. **ABOVE** Applying bright yellow paint to your mobile trench doesn't affect how enemies react to you, but it does liven up the murk. Why you'd want to bury your own trench in camouflage is a mystery to us. **LEFT** The larger Tube varieties are evocative amalgams of steel and sparks. This makes it all the more fun to blow them to pieces – you can almost smell the burnt wires



Knobs (ho ho) are fast-rolling critters that are tough to hit and fun to blow up, lending the game an arcadey element

Post Script

How Double Fine's storytelling is the first casualty of war

The fourth game resulting from Double Fine's 'Amnesia Fortnights', the rapid-prototyping sessions originally meant to generate ideas and morale during the studio's *Brütal Legend* publishing saga, *Trenched* is notable for having clearly devoted itself to creating punchy combat and a comprehensive customisation engine rather than human-level characters and narrative.

Sure, the brotherhood-turned-vendetta between Woodruff and Farnsworth and the thematic allusions to war trauma and the mass-media spectacle are well conceived – but this is a game in which the writing watches on the sidelines as the physics and lighting effects show off. In fact, the most disruptive moments of the game are the sudden cuts to Farnsworth's omnipresent television-head, which invariably takes forever to tell you about the game's next conceit. He's been too open about The Broadcast, he says, so now he's going to protect it – with his new defensive units. Why is he telling you this? Shoehorning game rules and unit introductions into dialogue is efficient, but can dilute the clarity of the former and impact of the latter.

It's easy to believe, from the sound of his voice and the things coming out of his speaker-mouth, that Farnsworth is a madman. He's dementedly named his Tube creations things like 'Arty' and 'Big Willie' – but the 18th time Woodruff warns you that "Here comes Big Willie! These guys are tough," you may feel a rational urge to leave this madness behind. For despite its irreverence, its willingness to undermine the gravitas of war games, the writing in *Trenched* is functional at its core. It is somewhat disheartening to understand that a funny joke – or, worse, an unfunny one – is a thinly disguised attempt to educate the player in unit behaviours and weapon strengths. The real horror of war is a tutorial that never ends.

Take as a point of comparison both *Costume Quest* and *Stacking*, in which simpler mechanics with clearer rules allowed Double Fine's humour and charm to exist at the forefront of the experience. Indeed, in those titles, strong, characterful backbones made up for a rote battle system and some stylistic overload, respectively. These were easy games to play for the joy of the next line of dialogue or character design, most of which existed for their own sake rather than to educate the player. Whereas in *Trenched*, even your inventory is a place in which gags and practical information jostle for space. A gun named Mr Pancakes ought to have 40 flapjacks' more personality than *Chromehounds'* MSK-HC1500/D, but it is defined by its crowd-clearing MIRV, a firing rate of '2', and the fact it fills three slots.

Great love has been put into the look, feel and fun of the mechs, and they are an unqualified success. *Trenched* wrings plenty of personality from its infinite-ammo carnage, in which explosions persist for seconds after you've cleared a wave (because you've been gleefully wasting grenades), or your flak rounds go astray and ignite an oil rig that vanishes like a firecracker. Players can imagine any Mr Pancakes backstory they wish when they pull the trigger. But the truth is that a generic tale of space marines and zombies wouldn't have diminished the quality of *Trenched*'s shootouts. And may have receded more appropriately into the background.

When *Trenched*'s funniest character mocks some dead Tubes ("Bite me," he tells them. "Oh, you were trying, weren't you?"), it's a timely reminder of the absurdity of the setup, and of Double Fine's ability to create amusing characters and surreal worlds. But *Trenched* also demonstrates how the developer's particular brand of storytelling can be woven more easily into the controlled settings of a puzzler or RPG, rather than a warzone in which players make their own stories on the frontlines. ■





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Call Of Juarez: The Cartel

The *Call Of Juarez* series has always been inclined to the dramatic, casting players as tortured souls with unwelcome destinies: brothers torn apart by petty jealousies against the backdrop of the American Civil War, or a preacher hunting down a wrongly accused American Indian. *Call Of Juarez: The Cartel* is about three law-enforcement officials putting aside the inter-departmental bullshit to get the job done.

As if dragging a spaghetti-western series into the modern day wasn't enough, such a slim setup leaves you wondering if *The Cartel* even remembers where it came from. The Old West is not all that's lost. The contemporary drug wars in Mexico are the background, and the treatment isn't realistic or sensitive: *The Cartel* uses a contemporary tragedy as little more than window dressing for an HBO-lite cop story.

The Mendoza Cartel, a nasty Mexican gang, is the target, and the game follows three protagonists from three law enforcement agencies working together to bring it down. *The Cartel*'s selling point is threeplayer co-op, or as developer Techland has unforgivably named it, 'co-opetition'. While playing, on-the-fly challenges pop up (numbered headshots, melee kills, etc) and, more infrequently, individual players are given a dodgy side-objective. Pull this off without getting spotted and XP, which funds weapons, is the reward, but if someone sees you they get the boost.

You're working together to complete a level, but every so often playing dirty, and it's a nice touch – especially when teammates are focused on a gunfight and forget their surroundings. But *The Cartel* has a serious problem: its core shooting action simply isn't very good. The weapons, unlocked by progression through the campaign and amassing XP, are as standard as they come, with no real snap to their impact. It's what you're shooting at, however, that's the real killer.

The Cartel's enemies are gangsters and more gangsters, with little in the way of charm or intelligent behaviour. Each gunfight begins with a group running into cover and staying there until the end of days, popping their heads out every so often. As opponents for a co-op shooter they're deadly dull, and when all an increased difficulty level does is increase their damage output, it's clear that the concept doesn't have legs.

To give credit where it's due, *The Cartel* isn't all about shooting: missions usually commence with the trio investigating an area on foot, and after a little exploration and exposition the gunfights begin. But there's little to do in these sequences beyond keeping an eye on your partners, moving steadily towards the next beacon, and praying the transition into gunfighting doesn't involve melee. These infrequent fistfights, via a rudimentary system with no challenge or bite to it, are absolutely terrible. Fortunately they're short – not something that can be levelled at the game as a whole, with its 15 campaign missions.

Publisher Ubisoft
Developer Techland
Format 360 (version tested), PC, PS3
Release Out now

The Cartel uses a contemporary tragedy as little more than window dressing for an HBO-lite cop story



The Cartel's final stab at variety lies in its driving sections. While vehicle handling is nothing special, and later sections can be nightmarish, such sections do break through the mediocrity to hit some occasional high notes. The chases have a little imagination to them, a few great sights along the way, and are accompanied by the best Morricone imitation *The Cartel* can muster. The highway can be a blood-stirring sight with this soundtrack, and these freewheeling sections offer that little taste of continuity as your gunslinging band brings down the outlaws.

But the illusion never lasts long, and *The Cartel* could never be called a good game – or a polished one. The visuals aren't in the same league as its competition, there's re-use of assets everywhere, and glitches, such as enemies disappearing and bullets hitting invisible walls, are frequent. And movement's far too restricted, too. In the ghost town shootout, we jumped down about four feet into a ditch, assuming it was cover. Our character stopped moving, then died. The environmental boundaries are unnecessarily strict, jerking you back almost as frequently as *Black Ops* – sometimes so quickly that the game-over screen is up before you can turn around.

The Cartel has many problems. The voice actors turn in heroically B-list performances, their chances hardly helped by a script that swears to the point of feeling like some kind of parody. "These assholes are starting to chap my ass" is one of the milder lines. At the other end of the scale? "You have the right to get your ass shot the fuck off by me." Even when the profanity's dialled down, clunky lines like "You've been spotted red-handed by Ben!" ensure that the game will steer well clear of a BAFTA nod.

FPS games, like action movies, can be sublime or ridiculous. This is aiming for the former, and often proves to be the latter. During one of *The Cartel*'s moments of high drama, an exchange goes wrong and the players are left looking at a desolate scene, which fades out. Then, just before the image disappears, comes an anguished scream of "motherfucker!" It's times like this that it becomes easy to see *The Cartel* attracting cult-game status for all the wrong reasons.

If the Old West is anything, it's a giant myth, and one that the *Call Of Juarez* games have always embodied. What *The Cartel* replaces this with – a mishmash of The Shield and conspiracy theories – is a much less substantial vision, played out within a world with no real resonance to it. In *Call Of Juarez*, Ray tore lunatic, half-crazed promises from the Bible, and questioned his faith as he hunted a killer. In *The Cartel*, Ben screams out the Biblical passages, and they're followed by nothing more than empty cuss words.

4







ABOVE *The Cartel*'s player characters are a charmless bunch. It's kind of the point, of course, but in the absence of any redeeming qualities these selfish, treacherous killers seem worse than the gangs they're shooting

TOP *The Cartel* begins with a running highway battle, the task force pursued by hardware-stuffed jeeps. Such flair is undercut by the basic physics and vehicle models, but the driving throughout rises above these limitations to provide some of the game's best moments. ABOVE The multiplayer servers were sadly empty when we rolled into town, but we'll keep checking – a few custom games with a handful of players suggests a heavy influence from *Killzone*'s offerings. RIGHT Characters can be weirdly inconsistent. In an early level, Kim worries about getting into a war with a gang to which her younger brother belongs – then calls them all "bitches" as you shoot 'em up



Earth Defense Force Insect Armageddon

With *Insect Armageddon* the *EDF* franchise heads west, relocating both its development and narrative. Vicious Cycle may be new to *EDF*'s world of giant bugs and big guns, but it's no stranger to B-movie shooters, having delivered the clunky, silly *Eat Lead: The Return Of Matt Hazard* a couple of years ago.

The team has been careful to work around *EDF*'s established run-and-gun template rather than try to reinvent it for a wider audience. The changes that Vicious Cycle introduces – character classes, a more rigidly tiered unlock ladder, and a focus on co-operative play – are welcome additions that provide structure to the mayhem and enhance the sense of escalation.

The battle for Earth has been relocated to New Detroit, under attack by the super-sized creepy crawlies and robotic nuisances that cropped up in the Japan of *EDF: 2017*. It's your job to lead a squad of brave souls unto the breach (whether AI or co-op players), reaching waypoints, activating transponders and self-destructs on downed ships, and, of course, blowing the living daylights out of anything with a glowing red weakspot or more than two legs. Vicious Cycle's engine barely stutters during the drawn-out, densely populated skirmishes, and it's to the studio's credit that *EDF*'s sense of scale has not only been preserved but, at times, increased during *Insect Armageddon*'s lean runtime. The latter stages of the game's third, climactic chapter are the standouts, providing some car-flipping, block-levelling action spectaculars in the heart of the city.

The flow of missions is dictated by your choice of character. The classes – agile Trooper, turret-throwing Tactical, armoured Battle and jetpack-wearing Jet – are varied enough in their loadouts and stats to require entirely different strategies to survive. Take a Trooper into the thick of it and you'll likely find yourself starting over (true to the *EDF* tradition, there are no in-game checkpoints), while the jetpack allows you to zip in and out of the fray with haste. The problem is, on first playthrough, certain classes just don't have a chance in certain scenarios. Try taking the Battle class into act three's boss showdowns and you'll obliterate more controllers than bugs as you sluggishly wade around trying to target weakspots. It's a frustrating balance issue that's resolved by multiplayer co-op, but for the lone player it can be an infuriating game of trial and error first time around.

For the stubbornly gung-ho player, the co-operative element of *Insect Armageddon* relieves the stress of constant restarts; the ability to revive and be revived by fellow soldiers is a godsend throughout and a shrewd concession to the casual crowd that shouldn't upset the fan-faithful. One of the less excusable gameplay errors, however, is the botching of *Gears Of War*'s timed active reloads. The windows of opportunity are often too small and the battles too hectic for active reloads to be anything but an inconvenience here. And if you screw up, you elongate the reload process by such a stretch that it can cause your campaign big trouble. It's a mechanic at odds with the unlimited-ammo, finger-constantly-on-the-trigger nature of *EDF*'s action.

Publisher Bandai Namco
Developer Vicious Cycle
Format 360 (version tested), PS3
Release Out now

bit.ly/p96dYp
Screenshot gallery

Vehicles and turrets pop up infrequently and are less eccentric than before, but they're positioned perfectly throughout missions to break up the gruelling pace. The red-faced thrill of accidentally obliterating a skyscraper with a stray shell from your tank has always been one of *EDF*'s charms, and it's good to see it present, correct and as hilarious as it's ever been.

The thrill of accidentally obliterating a skyscraper with a stray shell is present, correct and as hilarious as it's ever been



The character progression ladders are the reason to keep coming back to the short campaign, leading to bigger and more ridiculously named weapons (a Leviticus Dobro, anyone?) with which to grind through the missions. Upgrading the speed of your revival skill is actually incentive enough for a second run through the campaign. Survival mode – the game's nod to Horde mode – is a short, passable bolt-on that doesn't have enough meat on its bones to add real value. It's a sign of the game's Americanisation, too, which is most evident in *Insect Armageddon*'s art direction. Now catering to a more western palate, where *EDF: 2017* had the bold, brilliant shades of an anime like Gatchaman, the pervading influences here are Ronald Moore's Battlestar Galactica update, evident in the flying ships that stalk the city, and the wailing invaders of Spielberg's take on War Of The Worlds. The irony is that the game's more familiar urbanity takes away some of the colourful, alien wackiness that made *EDF: 2017* stand out from the crowd back in 2007. With its gloomier cityscape and armour-clad heroes, *Insect Armageddon* is in danger of wandering into the more general bracket of gruff, me-too western shooters. Fortunately, there's enough tongue-in-cheek character to lighten the tone and separate it from the pack. The banter between the higher-ups co-ordinating your missions and their perplexed underlings is well-timed and sharp, a mirror of the relationship many western players had with *EDF: 2017*'s localisation.

Vicious Cycle's tweaks to the *EDF* formula ultimately veer *Insect Armageddon* away from the arcade-like immediacy of its predecessors, potentially turning off many of the hardcore fans *EDF* has traditionally served. It also bucks the series' trend for budget pricing, its publisher clearly seeing a more marketable and accessible proposition in this latest mutation. Old hands will still find much of the personality and singular vision of the franchise intact, but it's the newcomers, ironically, who might find *Insect Armageddon* a jarring mix of old-fashioned thrills and modern gameplay trends.

6



LEFT Turrets offer a robust and powerful way out of the game's stickier situations. As the insect menaces get bigger, and some varieties start turning up in armour, they're a valuable lifeline to safety. **BELOW LEFT** *Insect Armageddon*'s action takes place almost entirely in the streets of New Detroit. Civilians run screaming from the attack, lending the street fights an often grandly cinematic air. **BELOW** The third-act showdown is the game's highlight, drawing in all the enemies and resources from earlier levels. Higher difficulties ramp up the challenge, making co-op an essential strategy





BELOW The 'Hector' class of enemy takes careful tactics and planning to defeat. Dropping turrets buys time to put enough distance between you and the iron giant to get a shot at its conveniently pulsating weakspot



FEAR 3

Publisher Warner Bros
Developer Day 1 Studios
Format 360, PC, PS3 (version tested)
Release Out now

The most horrific thing about *FEAR 3* is what a series purist might say about it. The closest it has to a bogeyman is the all-corrupting *Call Of Duty*, with its power to inflict dual weapon slots and recharging health on all in its wake. Don't be deceived into thinking this is the third part of a trilogy. It's the tenuous 'threequel', where a new and cheaper director talks the first movie's cast into an easy payday. Roles are resurrected, plot strands exhumed, fans betrayed.

This is so much the case in *FEAR 3* that, despite the return of the first game's sibling rivals, Point Man and Paxton Fettel, the entire experience has been turned on its head. Multiplayer is now the flagship feature, its ranks and perks cascading through a story that does little more than cough up maps. Alma, once omniscient poltergeist and terrifying unknown, is just a waypoint now. If you played *FEAR 2* then you know – shudder – how she got pregnant. In *FEAR 3*, her contractions are sending shockwaves of physics and skybox effects across the levels, triggering a recurring handful of scripted events: a spiralling helicopter here, a falling watchtower there, then another helicopter, a different tower. This isn't to make you laugh at the absurdity of it all – though that is a side effect – it's to create a sense of continuity where none has a right to exist.

This is still a game of flickering flashlights, blood murals, grisly tableaux and jump scares, but, with few exceptions, we've seen it all before. Through previous *FEAR*s (and *Condemned*s) we've had our fill of suburban places daubed in guts. We've found ourselves in labs, learned of all the wicked things that were done there, and avenged them in boss battles that weren't quite as bad as we thought they'd be. Except here, they are.

Singleplayer wears too obviously its outside inspirations: an airport from *Left 4 Dead*, the non-stop announcements of bonuses and acquired ranks. And because the first-aid health system has gone, there's that familiar pattern of charge in, take cover, displace to alcove and regenerate. None of which will matter to *FEAR*'s new audience, the one that prefers human opposition. It's welcome to it, of course, and there's no denying that Day 1 has a conscience when it comes to mode selection and dynamics. And, yes, this is the bit where we mention 'F**king Run'.

That attention-seeking co-op mode is pretty much as good as you've heard, though we wonder how much hype's been engineered to promote the game's 'first buyer' online pass, without which half the modes and maps become paid-for DLC. In F**king Run – we'll stop saying it now – four players have to run a gauntlet of enemies and obstacles while the fabulously named Wall Of Death (a Carpenter-esque fog bank that's so moody, it even has angry faces in it) closes in. If it catches someone then the entire team loses, so it's in everyone's interest to scurry back and revive them.

Multiplayer is the flagship feature. Ranks and perks cascade through a story that does little but cough up maps



With its own debts to *Left 4 Dead*, what elevates this mode is that each map has its own series of refuge points, weapon stockpiles and chase sequences.

Other modes rely a bit more on novelty, but confirm that the series' solid AI is still in evidence somewhere. Soul King is the most competitive, players starting as ghouls and strategically possessing enemies of their choice, using their new weapons to kill and harvest souls. Whoever has the most souls becomes the King, visible to everyone and at risk of being killed and losing half their stash. Soul Survivor is an *Infected* game type, one player chosen as the 'corrupted' and charged with turning everyone else to their side. Contractions is the most generic, happy to ape *COD*'s Zombies mode as increasingly tougher waves of meanies are unleashed by Alma's strangely pleasant-sounding 'contractions'.

Is the co-op any good? It makes the campaign more tolerable, at least. It's no mean feat that returning hero Point Man retains his slo-mo powers during online play, and his supernatural brother Paxton Fettel's possessions have a warm gimmicky feel to them, as though they'd been imported from a big fun game like *The Darkness*. The problem is that much else in co-op feels like a gimmick, too, from the treasure-hunt objectives (share points or steal them?) to the stats-based tussle over who is Alma's 'favourite son'. That, unfortunately, depends as much on the map design as player skills.

Furthermore, this is one game designed to support three ways to play: alone as Point Man, alone as the unlockable Fettel, or together in co-op. A game that is simply not up to the task of pleasing all of those scenarios all of the time, and often satisfying none of them. It's painfully obvious in singleplayer when waves and bosses are being doubled up, bloating a campaign that's still too short and shallow. Conversely, there are times in co-op when the more solo-friendly mobs are no competition at all, and together you simply steamroller them.

We absolutely applaud and appreciate *FEAR 3*, and it deserves whatever fans it gets. It's a broad package with a progressive approach to online/offline play, but much about it is better in concept than execution, and that, sadly, won't save it from the preowned shelves or stop its servers becoming graveyards.

It's a shame that a series Monolith should have finished has instead developed this strange and often *COD*-shaped growth, with its *constant* swapping of guns into dual slots, recharging health that saps challenge, and melee-rich combat. We hate its impotence, its utter lack of a scare beyond an aversion to getting shot. And with its market-led features and Skinner-box mechanics, we hate that a series that began as a lesson in horror – of the B-movie kind, admittedly – now feels so afraid of the competition.

7



RIGHT Paxton Fettel and his posession abilities are unlockable for singleplayer, which otherwise is the domain of the previous games' protagonist, Point Man. **BELOW RIGHT** The supermarket level is by far the game's best, with its combination of smart level design, real-world physics, limited ammunition levels and cultists. **BELOW** Certain areas are made easier to pass through while playing as Fettle by using his ability to phase in and out of reality





BELOW Only one in a dozen or so apparitions will actually do you harm, but naturally you shoot all of them to avoid any chance of being hurt (even if the new recharging health system means taking damage has lost its sting)



Ms Splosion Man

Your move, Unreal" chirps a hirsute Twisted Pixel staffer during an opening splash sequence advertising the studio's engine, Beard. It's easily the funniest moment in the game, but he could just as easily be offering the challenge to Duke Nukem, given the rampant, though daft, sexism prevalent throughout the game. Inane gossip-mag chatter, occasional 'girl power' exclamations and Ms Splosion Man's hunt for shoes – replacing the previous game's cakes – might intensify the comic horror of an out-of-control, explosive fugitive turning cowering scientists to chunks of meat with a casual giggle, but as the feminine stereotypes begin to pile up higher than the corpses, you'll find yourself wincing with increasing regularity.

But, occasional stumbles into such territory aside, Twisted Pixel's puzzle-platforming sequel is genuinely funny and another convincing demonstration of the studio's flair for delivering strong characters and animation, supported in no small part by breathless vocal performances and a wonderfully knowing soundtrack (see 'These hips don't lie'). As in *Splosion Man*, players must make judicious use of a single ability, exploding, in order to navigate the game's increasingly fiendish levels. You can explode up to three times in the air before needing to recharge, you can explode off walls to reach higher platforms, and you can be propelled in a variety of ways by detonating next to coloured barrels.

Much has been recycled, but notable additions include ziplines that dial up the pace and electric panels that keep you permanently charged – but turn barrels into a hindrance that threaten to blow you into whirling blades or spiked ceilings.

Many of the original game's problems are carried over as well, however. While *Ms Splosion Man* may outwardly revel in chaos, it requires the kind of scalpel-sharp precision that doesn't allow for improvisation, and often requires learning a performance by rote. Die too many times, and you'll be offered the option of skipping to the next checkpoint, but this feels like a blunt solution.

Still, this insistence on accuracy comes into its own when revisiting levels to post faster times – accompanied by a ghost of your previous performance or one downloaded from the leaderboards – and here the game comes close to *Super Meat Boy*'s levels of addictiveness. The multiplayer levels are also a riotous inclusion, even if locating your character among four sets of explosions can occasionally prove too difficult. *Ms Splosion Man* might have done little to fix the first game's flaws, but it confidently follows up on its raucous appeal.

7

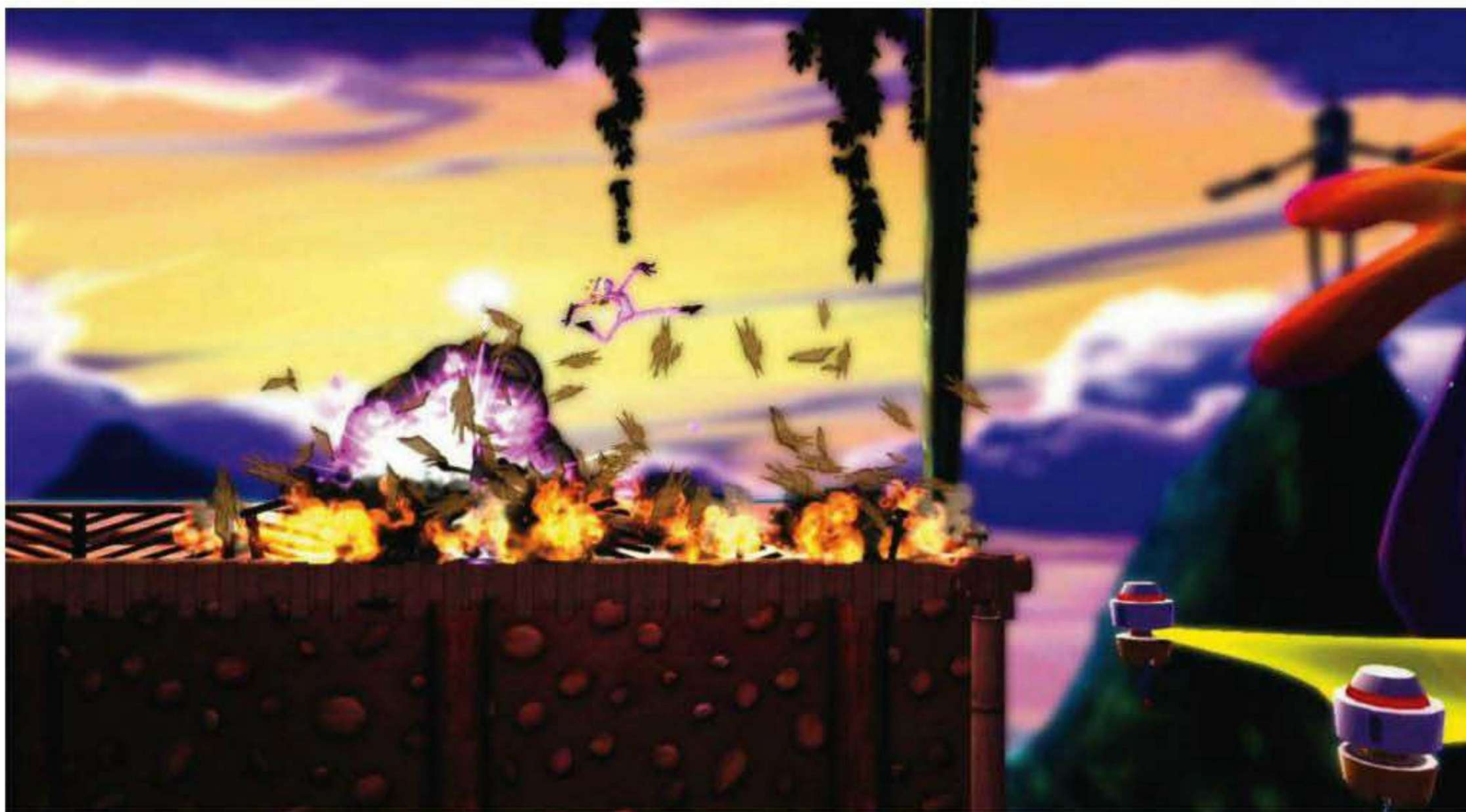
Publisher Microsoft
Developer Twisted Pixel
Format 360
Release Out now

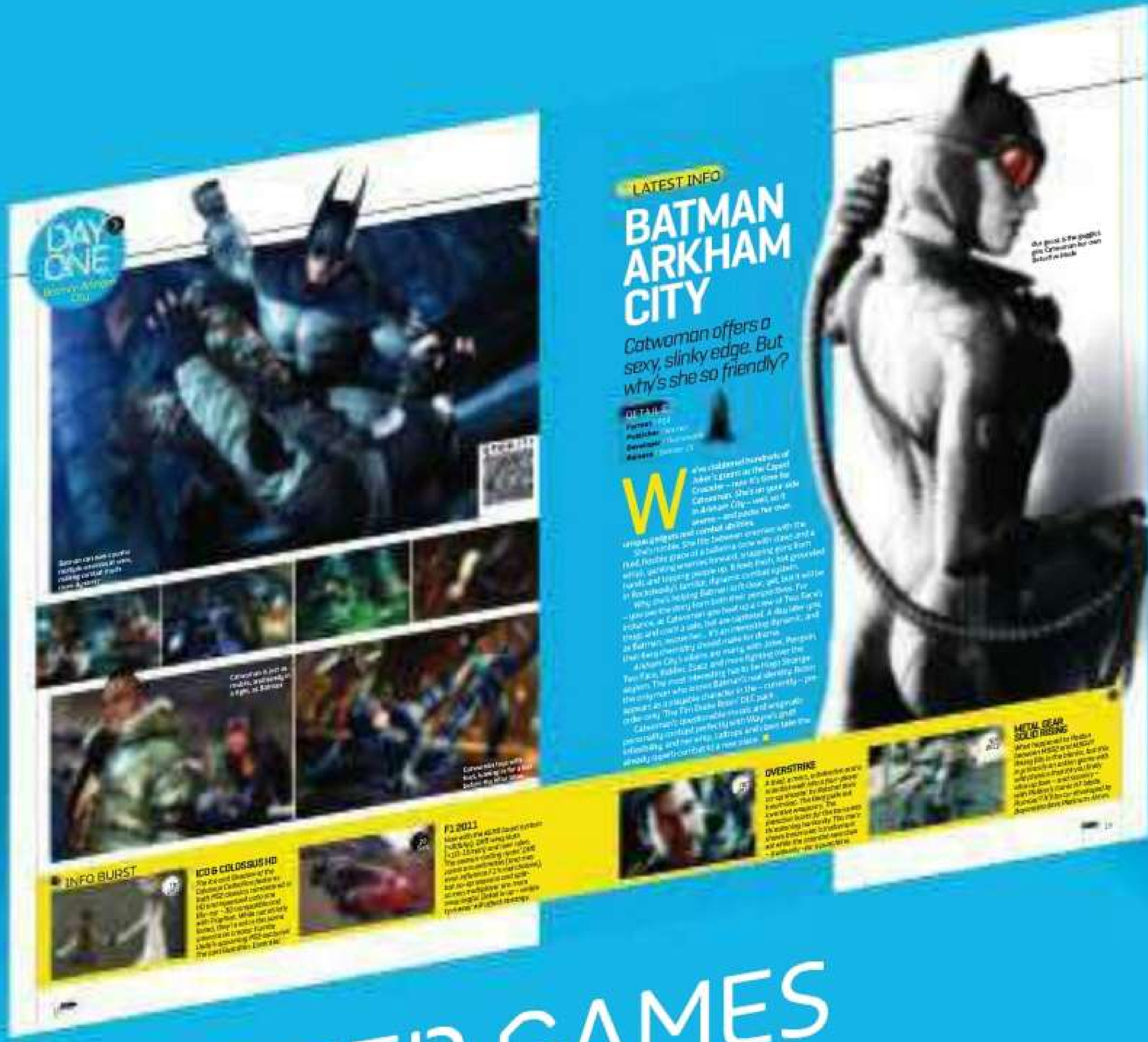


THESE HIPS DON'T LIE

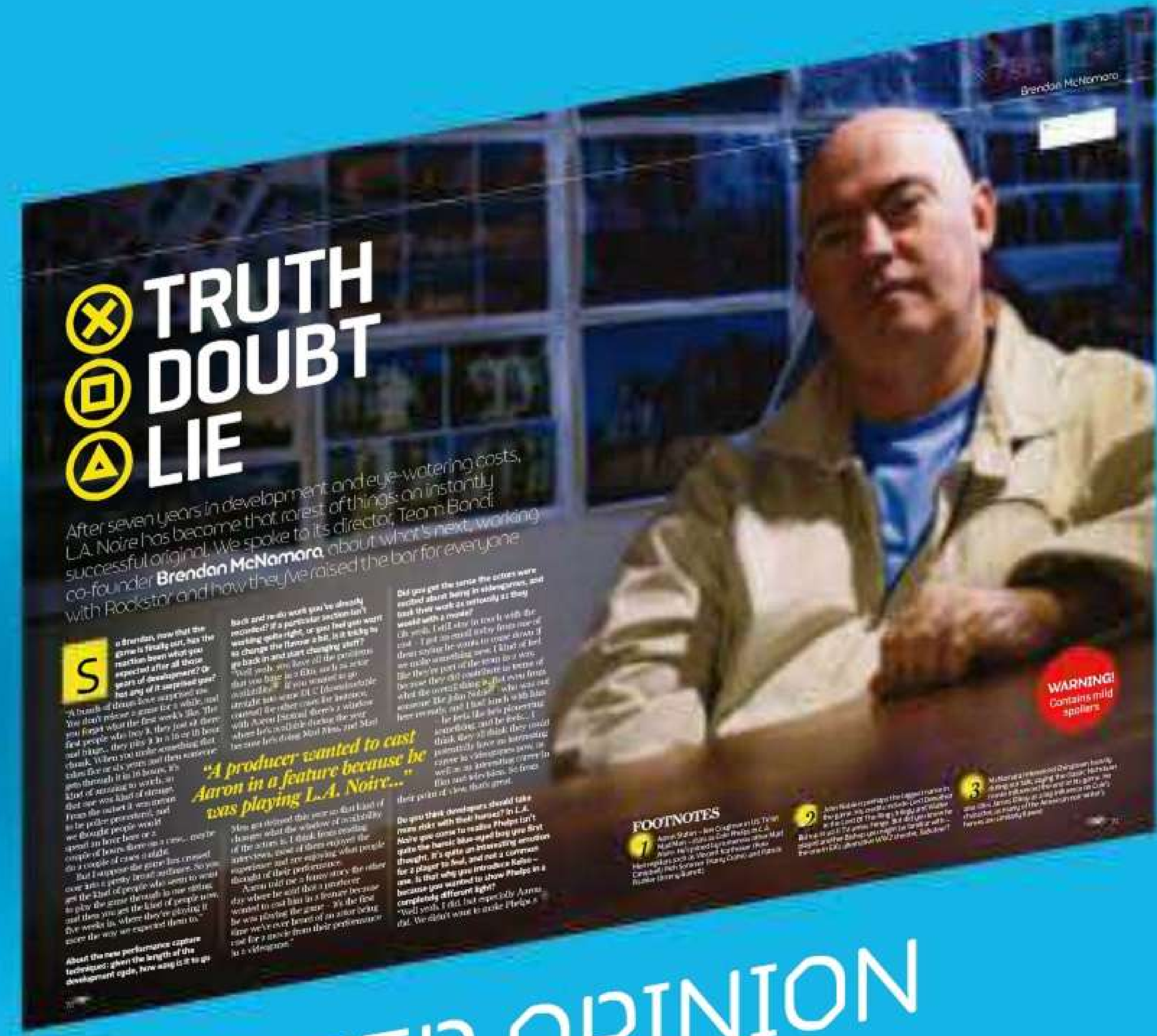
While the game's soundtrack is often brilliant, special mention goes to Matt 'Chainsaw' Chaney's ode to Mandy – a rotund scientist whose mouth you can jump in to gain protection from lasers; the sedate, reverb-soaked acoustic ditty that plays when you pause the game; and Badonkadonk, a pumping R&B pastiche which accompanies the weight gain inflicted upon you for choosing to skip a checkpoint: "If the size of your thighs hypnotise all the guys, then boom: back it up like a dump truck."

Ms Splosion Man might be pink, but it can be hard to pick her out when the camera pulls back. Twisted Pixel deserves an award for including the Pump Walk from Beyonce's Single Ladies video as an idle animation





SMARTER GAMES

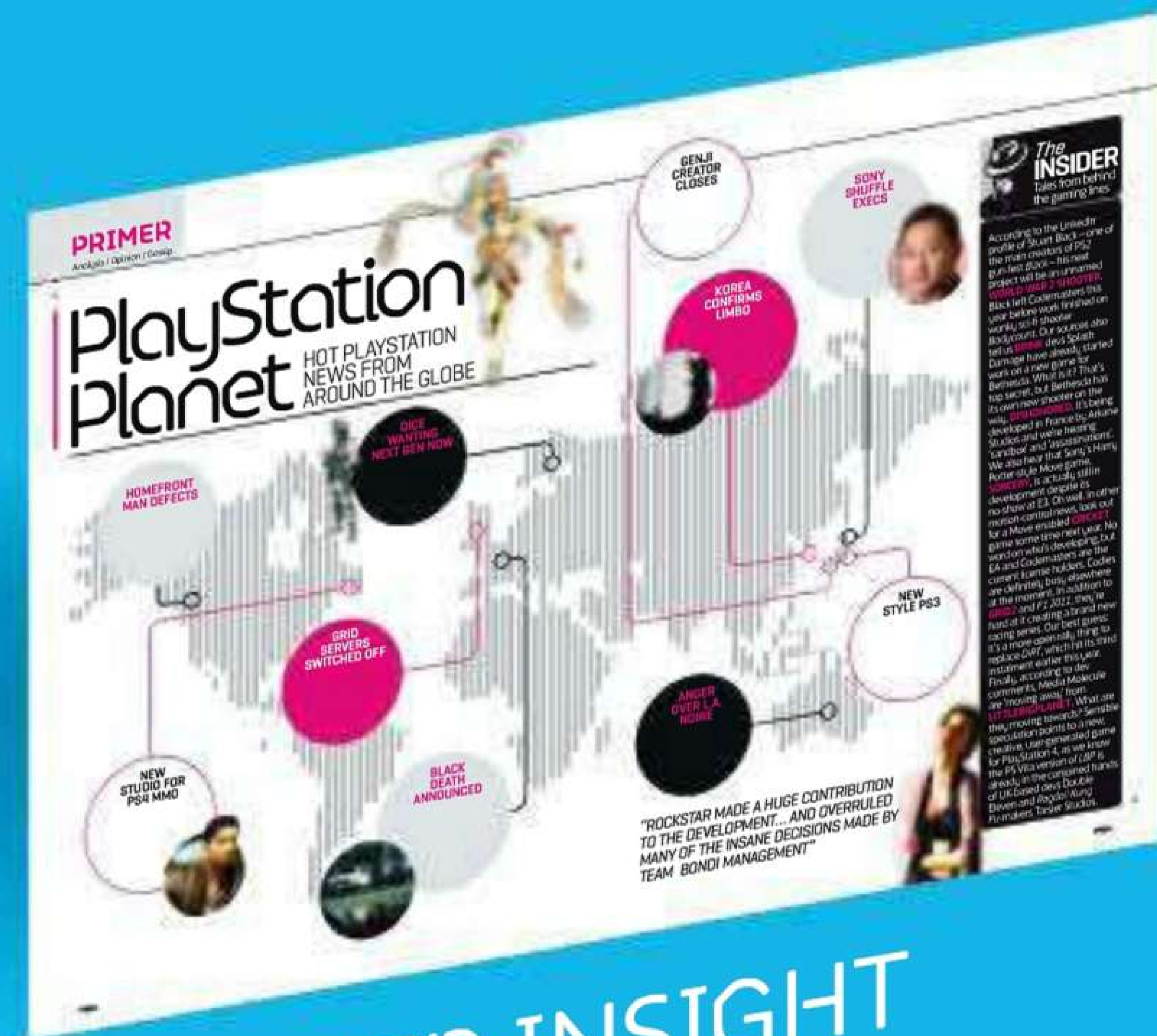


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Solatorobo: Red The Hunter

Eccentric and inventive, but ultimately late to the party, *Solatorobo* is more than deserving of the small amount of attention it's likely to attract coming in the wake of the launch of its host console's successor. It's a JRPG with brisk, snappy battling, and a pick-and-mix quest structure that prioritises variety over grinding monotony.

Solatorobo places you in control of Red – a mercenary, item fetcher and general odd-job fox in a world made up of floating islands populated by talking animals. While the events of the tutorial mission kick off what seems a typically large-scale narrative involving a world-destroying monster and the magical medallion that might just stop him, the structure that gradually unfolds reveals a game more concerned with short-term entertainment than grand scale.

Almost every one of the richly detailed, characterful islands of Red's world has a job centre, where players can pick from a menu of available quests. These range from the ordinary – clearing warehouses of enemy infestations, engaging in fighting tournaments – to the bizarre: battling through giant beehives, or spearing island-sized fish with an equally large harpoon gun. Almost all can be completed in a few short minutes, in no small part due to *Solatorobo*'s quickfire combat.

Rather than fight enemies directly, you do so while on the back of Red's mech, the Dahak. You spend most of the game stomping around on this device – occasionally hopping off for puzzles that require Red to hit switches and negotiate pathways beyond its reach. Fighting enemies (which, more often than not, are also large clomping machines) is a case of grabbing and flipping them with taps of the A button before throwing their prone form about the place.

There are some twists on this central mechanic – stringing combos together by catching enemies in the air as they bounce nets a damage bonus, for instance, while some enemies fire projectiles that must be grasped from the air and hurled back. Later on, the game adds a few minor twists to your abilities, but for the most part combat is simple and over quickly. The lively pace of battle and varied quest structure ensures that, even if a challenge begins to drag, players can be assured of a novelty around the next corner. And that's true in a grander sense, as well, for Cyberconnect2 is as bold with its adventure's overall structure as it is with its quest design, recalling *Okami* with an episodic sprawl.

Solatorobo's short attention span is occasionally its undoing – good ideas and mechanics are dropped as readily as bad – and the button-mashing combat can occasionally fatigue, but this an adventure both epic and bite-sized, with the kind of charm that makes its weaknesses easy to forget, and hard not to forgive.

7

Publisher Nintendo (EU), Namco Bandai (Japan), Xseed Games (US)
Developer Cyberconnect2
Format DS
Release Out now



OPTIMALLY PRIMED

The Dahak is a versatile contraption, capable of morphing into a plane for an ongoing race minigame, as well as a combat-ready, free-flight form used in the (too few) quests that require island-hopping aerial combat. While it levels up during battle, further enhancements can be made via an upgrade screen that functions much like *Resident Evil 4*'s inventory: the more valuable an upgrade, the more space it fills on a board that you gradually uncover over the course of the game.













While the Dahak can fly (above left) and square up to assorted beasties (top right), it can't swim: Red must leave his usual perch on its back (above centre) and brave the fish himself (top centre)







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create

Lifting the lid on the art, science and business of making games

In this issue's People, Places, Things we talk to the new CEO of *Second Life* developer Linden Lab, Rod Humble (p126), about why he walked away from his role overseeing the likes of *The Sims* at EA Play and into one running an online world many feel has had its day. On p128 we explore the labyrinthine test chambers of Aperture Science to discover how Valve's designers made us love *Portal*'s linear labs, and on p130 bolt ourselves into *BioShock*'s Big Daddy drill arm to strike terror into the hearts of those damned Splicers. Studio Profile (p132), meanwhile, takes us to ArenaNet to find out how the heads of the *Guild Wars* studio made a break from Blizzard and struck out on their own, while The Making Of… takes a peaceful turn into the meadows of thatgamecompany's *Flower* (p136), to discover why this most relaxing of games once made players turn the air blue with frustration. Then, on p140, we talk to the company that has its chip designs inside the world's leading handheld gaming devices and smartphones – along with some older examples, too – and consider what this means for the future of home consoles. Rounding out this issue's Create are our regular columnists, with designer Tadhg Kelly (p144) examining the limitations of storytelling in games, LucasArts' Clint Hocking (p147) training his sights on another elephant, Randy Smith (p148) of indie developer Tiger Style settling down to replay *Grand Theft Auto IV*, and writer James Leach (p150) picking his words carefully as he sends troops on to the battlefield.





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On p130 we look at the power of the Big Daddy's drill arm, a weapon that *BioShock 2* put into players' hands

People

ROD HUMBLE

The man who walked away from EA to embark on a Second Life



Getty Images

As a game designer, Humble sees a need to explore the different aspects of players' lives, saying: "The you who goes to church is very different from the you who goes to the tavern"

After 20 years in the game business, **Rod Humble**'s visit to 2011's E3 was greeted by a professional skepticism. Only a few months earlier, Humble had walked away from running one of EA's most successful divisions – the *Sims*- and *Spore*-driven EA Play – and landed behind the CEO desk at Linden Lab.

This wasn't Microsoft or Sony, Ubisoft or Activision. Nor some promising startup stacked with talent. No, Humble jetted from the centre of the game universe to work for the company that runs *Second Life*, the once red-hot virtual world that has since faded from the cultural spotlight.

Second Life, every gamer could tell you, wasn't a game. Worse, to the gamer's eye, this world simulator was some sort of platform for business, or maybe education, or a tawdry district thick with virtual sex. And wasn't this the company that fired a third of its workforce last year, and then watched its CEO depart under a cloud of community distrust? *Second Life* wasn't the place to tempt a successful designer and executive.

"I initially went: 'Hmm.' I think I had the same reaction a lot of people do. 'Are those guys still around?'" Humble, the affable gamer who can often be mistaken in an industry crowd for one of the T-shirt-wearing, skateboard-shoed developers rather than a suit-and-tie business executive, took some convincing.

"A lot of the attraction of Second Life is you can be who you want and make what you want"

"From the core gamer perspective, you have a hit and then it goes away." Thinking about *Second Life* as an MMOG – and Humble spent four years working on *EverQuest* with Sony – didn't suggest a dynamic and growing business opportunity. "My assumption was: 'OK, it must be really going down.'"

Humble is the kind of guy who looks past the surface with an intellect and business instincts developed over two decades in the electronic entertainment trenches. He saw a spark: "I hadn't realised before that it was a creativity tool." And when Humble senses a chance for players to express themselves, he also sees a chance to grow a healthy business.

Humble started in the game business working on a *Lemmings*-like game called *The Humans* for a UK studio. A string of industry jobs included a stint creating online games for Virgin Interactive and running his own online game development company, Harmless Games. He eventually went to work for Sony Online before landing at EA – initially as a producer, but a few short years later earning the title of executive vice president of EA Play. Then came *Second Life*, an apt metaphor for the professional shift he was ready to make.

"The more I dug into it, the more I realised that it was a really good fit," he says. "There were opportunities to grow *Second Life*, but to also take the company, which sat in a very healthy position in terms of cash and profit and operations, and grow the product lines, or go into new areas, around this idea of creativity."

Despite widespread speculation to the contrary, the privately held Linden Labs reports annual revenues of over $75 million last year. "I really enjoy business," says Humble. "And I have enjoyed running larger and larger businesses. And that's given me a real sense of pleasure. It's not particularly interesting to talk about in interviews, because it's kind of dry. But it's a fabulous feeling to take a large, multi-hundred-million dollar business and grow it."

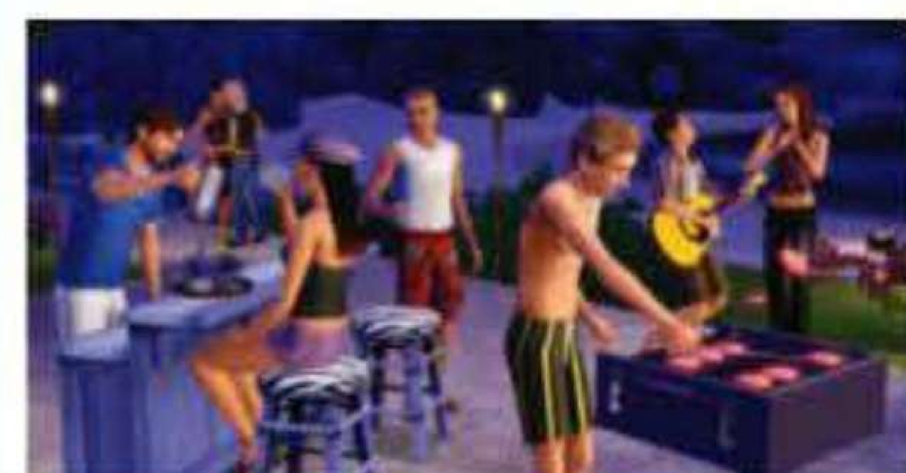
And so far, the game developer turned game executive has found a happy home among flying avatars, pose balls and all-night online raves. "By and large, I think most of *Second Life*'s community is pretty impressed with Rod so far," offers **Wagner James Au**, virtual world blogger and author. In Au's view, Humble's arrival has coincided with many necessary improvements to the technical infrastructure of the world. Even more importantly, Humble's leadership provides a break from the breathless proclamations made by *Second Life* founder Philip Rosedale and the hard-nosed business stylings of previous head Mark Kingdon.

Log on to Humble's personal Web page, and this mantra of creativity comes into focus. Because not only is a Humble a game developer, game designer and game businessman, he is also a game artist.

From Humble's sparse site you can download four of his art-game experiments. *The Marriage* offers an abstract poem centred on the nature of relationships, while *Last Thoughts Of The Aurochs* explores what it means to think like an animal. *Stars Over Half Moon Bay*, meanwhile, presents a meditative interaction with the night sky, while *STAVKA-OKH* uses the WWII map of Europe to interrogate the irony of organisational management. Humble's hobby games are quirky, personal and deep.

CV

URL www.lindenlab.com; www.rodvik.com
CV Imagitec Design (*The Humans*), Virgin Interactive (*SubSpace*); Sony Online (*EverQuest*); EA (*The Sims 2* and *3*); executive vice president at EA Play; CEO at Linden Lab



When he looks at *Second Life*, Humble sees a place where people can escape the pressure of real life while sliding past the manufactured narrative of most mainstream entertainment. "A lot of the attraction is you can be who you want and make whatever you want," he explains.

On this point, Humble draws a line in the virtual sand and suggests, perhaps philosophically, that people need to invent their own private realities. "Here, I am kind of at odds with the Facebook philosophy, which is we want to bring your real-life persona into everything and we want to share it and you can link that back, and I think there is a growing sense of unease amongst a lot of intelligent users about this idea."

Just as importantly, Humble sees the creative opportunities in *Second Life*'s somewhat anarchic, user-driven world. Unlike an online game such as *EverQuest*, the *Second Life* player lives out their own script performed on the stage of their choosing, free from the constraints of narrative and design brought to the game by an all-seeing, all-knowing designer.

In his short time at the company, Humble has aimed his teams at improving their customer service capabilities to serve the current *Second Life* community and worked on making the somewhat daunting *Second Life* interface easier to use in order to bring the fun of virtual worlds to a bigger audience. It's a fundamental business point: get more people playing in *Second Life*'s sandbox world, and you grow the business.

But where the businessman sees growth opportunities, and the art-game maker sees the joy in creativity, Humble the game designer puts his finger on something he'd like to see more of in *Second Life*: things to do. "I want there to be some sort of Linden-sponsored activity that is the equivalent of the sewing in the sewing circle, the chess in the chess club, just a simple activity that you can always say: 'You know what, let's go do this. It's fun.'" ■

Places

APERTURE SCIENCE

Valve's time-ravaged laboratory is a masterpiece of darkly comic but linear design

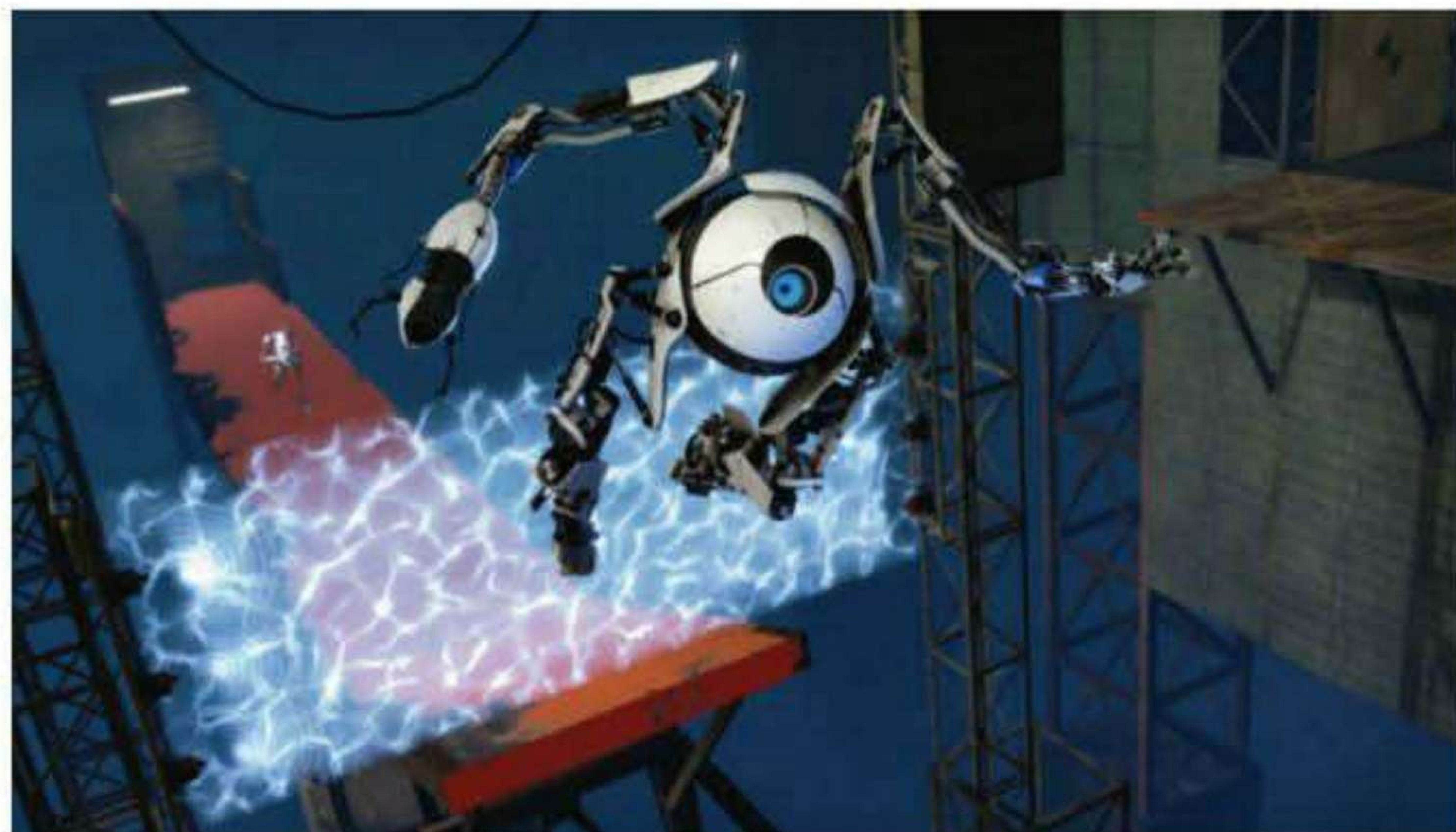


Aperture Science's detailing invokes Cold War paranoia and iPod chic, but the scope is that of a fable: rooms that shift, reform, and can extend seemingly without limitation

From *Portal* (2007), *Portal 2* (2011)
Developer Valve Software
Origin US

Aperture Science's rambling facilities were built by a man going mad. That man and his madness, however, are creations of one of the sanest videogame companies on the Earth. This makes for an intriguing contradiction, and one that lies at the centre of *Portal 2*. The environment suggests a world of chaotic experimentation, while the lineage promises a sharp tragicomic narrative, defined by clever reversals and feints. Freedom or lies, then: which is Aperture Science's true legacy?

Videogames have hit the labs before, but no other designers have come close to capturing the atmosphere of a place like Aperture. *Portal's* Marie Celeste institution may be almost entirely devoid of human life, but it's filled with signs of troubled human intelligence. Its chambers are clinical yet suggestively horrifying, and they're covered with nasty jokes capable of punching through dense layers of industrial-strength corporate euphemism.



A gel-powered leap into the unknown is nothing of the sort; naturally, Valve's designers have been everywhere before you

The first *Portal* game's greatest trick was to gradually lift the veil, pulling back the bright steel and textured glass to reveal decades of hidden neglect: PowerPoint lectures playing to audiences of dust bunnies and rats, intrusive close-circuit cameras broadcasting their secrets to nobody. *Portal 2* goes farther, offering not only an automated tour, but a kind of architectural CV: a company history written in strata, as the troubled facility's test suites evolve upwards, mutating from primitive concrete to gleaming, clean-edged mousetraps.

With its patches of *Portal* paint and circuit-board lighting, few games wrest such aesthetic pleasures from a basic desire for readability, and few games can suggest so much time passing – so much strife, disaster and human desolation – with a single intruding creeper, a brace of upturned chairs, or a couple of busted ceiling tiles.

It's another Valve masterpiece, then: a videogame environment that builds everything from crafty player tips to full-blown tutorials into its geometry. This is a place where the walls rumble with mystery while special-case scripting ensures that you'll never bodge a mission-critical jump, and where a patient infinity of user-testing has been employed to shepherd even the least gifted of players across the finish line.

Such a controlled, and controlling, design doesn't come without a price, however, and the price Aperture ultimately pays is science itself. Valve's peerless courtesy towards its audience has resulted in a laboratory where it's tricky to get stuck, but it's also tricky to actually experiment; a laboratory where you're mostly left to reverse-engineer solutions that have been crafted well in advance of your arrival. As a game, it's a democratic and tightly focused approach. The only problem is that science just isn't like that; it's brutally meritocratic. It's fiercely, often uselessly open-ended.

> The problem is science isn't like this: it's brutally meritocratic, it's often uselessly open-ended

And so even if Aperture's meant to be a test facility rather than a true research laboratory, it can be hard to escape the nagging sense that Valve has already tested the equipment itself and decided you're not quite smart enough to wield it without constant – if silent – instruction. Travel deeper into the complex and you aren't just unpicking the corporation's history, you're watching Valve's experience in user-testing challenging its brilliance with mechanics.

Your arsenal soon bristles with propulsion and repulsion gels, faith plates and excursion funnels, but they're for use in a world that grows more tightly controlled with each addition. Meanwhile, as the levels become larger, they also become more limited. Linear and sparsely interactive, they eventually devolve from compact test chambers into scattered islands of safety suspended above instant-death oceans, while your fascinating new tools are often used as mere modifiers for a handful of core moves – the portal-boosted long jump, say, or the funnel-to-funnel switchover.

Portal 2 is vivid, ingenious, and approaches its players with kindness and forethought: why should we ask for more? If anything, it's because the fiction of Aperture Science is simply too appealing to let go of. It's because, locked in its halls and handed its gadgets, you may find that you truly want to experiment, even at the cost of such easy progress. In the same way that the gravity gun defined your time in City 17, portal tech and all those gels and whistles seem so wildly applicable that you want to step away from the unmissable jumps and invisible breadcrumb trails in order to just mess around and see what happens. That's an ambition that no developer could truly meet, perhaps – certainly not Valve, which is too holistic, and too gifted with form and narrative and set-piece to ever construct something as dangerously chaotic as a simple sandbox.

Maybe it wouldn't even want to. After all, Aperture Science is assembled from myriad layers of deception, and so even *Portal 2's* contradictions might ultimately be smartly thematic. Maybe it's fitting, in other words, that a game that begins in a motel room which isn't really a motel room concludes in science labs which aren't really science labs any more – nor are they really owned by Aperture after all this time. Instead, the entire venue has passed on to stranger, more openly vindictive post-human owners, who have left behind industrial research in order to build a chic gauntlet of torture. And you have no chance of ever truly breaking free. ■

Things

BIOSHOCK'S DRILL ARM

Not your average industrial eviscerating death machine



The drill arm didn't appear until late in the development of the Big Daddy. Earlier weaponry concepts included a wrist-mounted spinning blade and a handheld double hook

The Bouncer Big Daddy's drill is one of the most frightful weapons in that most frightful of weapon classes: melee. Big enough to chew a man inside-out and rusty enough to give whatever's left a delightful case of tetanus, few can really compare. Bobby the Scissorman's shears in *Clock Tower*, maybe; *Resident Evil 4*'s chainsaw, definitely. And obviously there's Red Pyramid's giant chopper in *Silent Hill 2*.

None of these weapons is defined by gore, though. What they have in common – and what separates them from, say, the Lancer Bayonet in *Gears Of War*, or the lawnmower in *Dead Rising* – is barbarism. What Bobby would do with those shears is nothing new to the average *Moonstone* player, but that he's resolved to do it to an orphaned young girl is unconscionable. Ditto Red Pyramid's stalking and slaughter of Maria, and the one-hit overkill of the Chainsaw Ganado.

First impressions are that the drill is much the same, boring into people whose armour consists of waistcoats, cummerbunds and masquerade masks. But the twist in *BioShock* is that most of its sadism is reserved for the Daddy itself. These hulking products of Point Prometheus are no predators, and the drill's too massive to suit an assassin or butcher. It feels more like a deformity, a curse, or just a weird barnacled memento.

Whatever it is, the key to this melancholic menace is that it clearly doesn't belong – not on anything with two legs; not within five metres of unprotected flesh; not in the average firstperson shooter; and absolutely not on the end of someone's arm. It's hard to imagine many alternatives with that vital shred of credibility, not to mention a unique shape that says 'danger' no matter what it's doing or how you look at it.

The drill's too massive to suit an assassin or butcher. It feels more like a deformity

Designs this successful – it was this Big Daddy, not the gun-toting Rosie, that achieved instant iconic status – do not come overnight. Their evolution is well-documented, and the facts of development cross regularly into the fiction of Rapture. Both depict these bizarre creatures as Frankenstein's monsters made of improvised parts, and experiments of increasing precision. Early concepts are gloriously unsubtle, one plonking a full-blown submersible (with guns for 'ears') on to a barely articulated diving suit. Gradually, the limbs and carapaces become more stable, locking down the anatomy to one last detail: the arm. In the materials released by Irrational, only on the final Bouncer render is the drill even there.



BioShock 2 **casts you as Subject Delta, an early-model Big Daddy, and puts the spinning implement well and truly in your hands**

The idea of the Daddy as some kind of invalid comes and goes in these documents. At one extreme you have the 'Slow Pro', sat in a wheelchair with legs amputated above the knee; at the other, the Bouncer's drill is swapped for a normal hand and wrist-mounted spinning blade. A character's defining qualities don't always come first, it tells us, but there's no mistaking them when they do. No matter how close the other concepts get, only the drill-equipped Bouncer has the asymmetry that made it a star, one half gentle, the other most certainly not. No other Daddy, furthermore, can copy the Little Sister's silhouette as she brandishes that giant syringe. Somewhere, be it in marketing material or the subconscious, these things matter.

It's why many, if not most, consider character and weapon design to be inseparable. The benefits are simply too great to ignore, and you only have to look at old footage of *P.N.03* (from when the game featured gun combat) to see a startling realtime contrast. Just like that game's butt-shakin', finger-snappin' Vanessa Schneider – and you may as well bring back the previous survival horror examples – there's little about the Bouncer Big Daddy that doesn't answer to the drill, from its awkward gait to its terrifying dash to the commanding proportions of its trunk and head.

Early impressions of *BioShock Infinite* suggest nothing less of the Daddies' spiritual successors, the Handymen. Their tiny heads, gorilla-like posture and near-perfect symmetry stand in almost complete opposition to the Bouncer, and their role seems sure to follow.

BioShock 2, meanwhile, asks tough questions of the drill when it puts it in players' hands. This isn't *God Of War* or *Mega Man*, and had Irrational meant for such powers to be transferred, you'd think it might have done it in the first game's Proving Grounds, where the hero submits to the Daddification process. And of course it didn't.

2K Marin did, however, in a move met with "crazy scepticism" according to creative director **Jordan Thomas**. Obvious casualties were the player's respect for weapons like the drill, the strange nobility of the Daddies themselves, and to some extent the consensual nature of combat. At the time, Thomas maintained that "in *BioShock 1* you would defeat the Big Daddy and he'd have this big badass drill on his hand. So you'd be like: 'Man, that thing is better than this wrench I've got; I wish I could use that.' And you couldn't. Well, in *BioShock 2* you actually begin with the drill."

Some might cheer this kind of play while others roll their eyes. But whatever you might say of its ethics, few can knock the implementation. The drill becomes *BioShock 2*'s version of *Ninja Gaiden*'s wooden sword, the risible trinket that with upgrades becomes the most devastating weapon. It's an interesting trick, bribing the player to stay true to values you've ostensibly abandoned yourself. While it spoils you with guns, its loyalty remains, quietly, with the drill. ■

STUDIO PROFILE

ArenaNet

The Guild Wars studio whose founders came out of the Blizzard with some revolutionary ideas and a love of trying something new



1 *Guild Wars* introduced henchmen – NPCs who assist you in combat. Pictured here is Aidan, a ranger with a ready quiver of arrows on his back.
2 *Guild Wars: Nightfall* features the Master of Whispers, who commands a secret organisation.
3 In *Guild Wars: Eye Of The North* players encountered frog-men called the heket. In *Guild Wars 2* the species has evolved into the hylek, with lashing tongues and poisons.
4 *Guild Wars 2* features eight professions with wide-ranging skills and tactics. Pictured here is the warrior – a master of arms who can wield the widest range of weapons in the game

ArenaNet co-founder and president **Mike O'Brien** has a host of amenities at his disposal in the company's brand-new studio digs in Bellevue, Washington. The building is packed with bleeding-edge IT infrastructure and miles of high-bandwidth fibre optics. Rows of clear dispensers hang in the snack area brimming with M&Ms, Skittles, Cheez-Its and other nibbles – the game-studio equivalent of a cattle farm's grain silos. An outdoor patio off the main conference room boasts views across tree-lined hills all the way to the Seattle skyline. What O'Brien – or 'Mo' as he's referred to by his ArenaNet colleagues – doesn't have is an office. He'll be the first to assure you, however, that this was not an oversight in the architectural drawings.

"We relate it back to the 'working in a computer lab in college' kind of environment," he explains. "Where if you're working with somebody else on a project, you're sitting next to them, you can lean over and say, 'I need help on this.' You don't have to have a lot of meetings because you know what everybody else is working on because you're all in the same room. We wanted to create that kind of an atmosphere. I want to be in whatever room I can be contributing the most, and doing the most good at any given time. But I'm always sitting in a room with the team."

The ArenaNet president's desk – nondescript in every way – currently resides in the Content Programming department (the studio's "nerve centre," O'Brien calls it). Just two months ago, he points out, you would've found him working alongside the studio's character artists. By routinely floating between departments, O'Brien gains a more holistic picture of how *Guild Wars 2* – the sequel to ArenaNet's multimillion-selling online RPG *Guild Wars* – is progressing. And nothing boosts morale quite like a general climbing off his horse and charging into battle alongside his troops. To fully appreciate the factors underlying the blueprint for ArenaNet's company culture, however, you have to look back at O'Brien's first job in the game industry, which came about through a twist of mind-boggling serendipity.

It was the mid-'90s, and O'Brien was still living in his hometown of Irvine, California, working as a programmer on rail traffic-control software. He desperately needed a change and had begun searching for the career-track version of an emergency railroad switch. His favourite game at the time was *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans*, so he flipped over the box one day to see where the developer Blizzard was based. He'd grown up not only playing games but programming his own on an Apple II, so the thought of working in the game industry felt plausible enough. As luck would have it, Blizzard's offices were located just two blocks from his apartment. He paid it a visit soon after and, based on the strength of a multiplayer object-gathering game and Apple II emulator he'd written, Blizzard offered him a job working as a programmer on *Warcraft II*. The company employed roughly 35 people at the time.

"Gaming is about trying something you can't try in the real world. So let's try something new"

To this day, O'Brien carries many fond memories of his time at Blizzard, but he doesn't miss the hallways with private offices lining either side. ArenaNet's lead game designer **Eric Flannum**, who also worked at Blizzard during that period, tells a similar story. "The door of my office looked out on to the wall between doors on the other side of the hallway," Flannum says with a laugh. "So I couldn't even see another human being without physically stepping outside of my office. It felt really isolating." For an MMOG developer such as ArenaNet, it's only fitting that the studio eschewed the singleplayer aesthetic of programmers working in seclusion in favour of a lively, social means of attacking the challenges of game development.

ArenaNet's three founders – O'Brien, Patrick Wyatt and Jeff Strain – met while rising to influential positions within Blizzard. After spending years developing the company's Battle.net service, O'Brien had handed over its management to Wyatt (then Blizzard's vice president of research and development) in order to lead the *Warcraft III* team. The final member of the three, Strain, was heading up the *World Of Warcraft* team. But as Blizzard's mounting success prompted a more conservative approach to game development, the trio's taste for innovation made the work increasingly less gratifying.

"Blizzard was going through some changes at the time," O'Brien says, "going from a company that easily took risks to a company that was much less able to take that kind of risk. They ended up wanting to go down a path where *Warcraft III* would be more of a straight sequel to *Warcraft II*.

"There are different ways that players have fun with a game, and it's certainly true that one way that players have fun with a game is that it's something they've played before, but this is a very highly polished version of that. And if people want to play that, there are companies in this industry who are going to deliver that to them. But at ArenaNet what we really look at is giving players new experiences. Gaming is about trying something. It's trying something you can't try in the real world. So let's try something new. And so we founded ArenaNet to innovate, and we've tried to make innovation the core tenet in how we develop games."

The three announced their resignation from Blizzard in February of 2000. Having originally settled on the name Triforge for the new company, they changed it soon after to ArenaNet. "After leaving Blizzard, we had to pick a name quickly. We picked Triforge quickly and we didn't like it because it had the word 'tri-' in it," O'Brien says. "We didn't want it to be all about the three of us."

Two important decisions were made early on to safeguard ArenaNet's commitment to innovation. Instead of setting up shop across the



***Guild Wars 2* will head underwater, stripping away the oxygen bar and sluggishness that typically handicaps aquatic games**

ARENANET

Founded 2000
Employees 270
Key staff Mike O'Brien (co-founder and president), Randy Price (SVP global business), Eric Flannum (lead game designer), Colin Johanson (lead content designer), Daniel Dociu (chief art director), Jeff Grubb (continuity and lore lead), Chris Lye (global brand director)
URL www.arena.net
Selected softography *Guild Wars, Guild Wars: Factions, Guild Wars: Nightfall, Guild Wars: Eye Of The North*
Current projects *Guild Wars 2*





Instead of having separate dining areas in its light and airy new Washington studio space, ArenaNet wanted a large central one (left) to encourage staff from different departments to mingle. Above: a Charr Elementalist unleashes a deadly fire charge attack in *Guild Wars 2*

street from their former employer and operating a revolving door of talent with Blizzard, the company would relocate from Southern California to the Pacific Northwest, eventually settling in the tech-industry hotbed of Seattle. And instead of funding the business with game-industry money at its inception, ArenaNet would rely solely on venture capital. "Because we were venture-capital funded," O'Brien explains, "we were able to take the kind of risks that no one was willing to take at that time." The company shaved costs wherever possible. That first summer in Seattle, ArenaNet's staff of 12 worked out of O'Brien's living room, which didn't have functioning air-conditioning. So, aside from the risk of heat stroke, what other risks did ArenaNet plan to take?

"You have to rewind time 11 years to think of some of these things as being shocking," says O'Brien, "because today it doesn't seem shocking. But 11 years ago it was revolutionary to make a game that lived entirely on the Internet and used a content-streaming model so that it could be very dynamic. Instead of having to burn a game to a DVD and be very conservative about how much we were willing to patch beyond that, we wanted to have a game that had a life of its own."

"Eleven years ago it was revolutionary to make a game that lived entirely on the Internet"

In April of 2003 – four months after announcing its acquisition by South Korea-based online game company NCsoft – ArenaNet finally unveiled its project: *Guild Wars*. This new online RPG would attempt to marry the thematic richness of fantasy RPGs with the engrossing mechanics and challenge of strategy games. The announcement sent ripples through the MMOG development community, but not necessarily because of *Guild Wars'* gameplay innovations.

For players in North America, the game would be offered without a monthly subscription fee. At the time, charging such fees was standard practice in the MMOG space. Leaving them behind would require maximum efficiency in the technologies propping up the game.

"In order to offer a game that doesn't charge a monthly fee," O'Brien explains, "you have to make sure it's not going to be so support-heavy that the only way you can afford to support it is by charging a monthly fee. Or that the servers and bandwidth are so expensive that you can only afford them by charging a monthly fee. But we thought, 'You know, it can be done. Just because nobody's done it before, that doesn't mean it can't be done'. We *knew* it could be done."

Building an online world requires a staggering amount of content, and partnering with NCsoft allowed ArenaNet to grow its staff aggressively over the next several years to meet that demand. Having operated for two and a half years with a staff of 12, the studio grew to 65 people by the time *Guild Wars* shipped in April of 2005. The following year, ArenaNet saw another spike in growth, doubling in size from 65 to 135 people. This gave ArenaNet the resources to ship *Guild Wars: Factions* just one year later, and the *Nightfall* expansion six months after that.

Today the firm employs in the region of 270 people – 200 developers working directly on *Guild Wars 2*, plus a QA department, in-house support staff and publishing staff. But the most remarkable thing about ArenaNet's team has less to do with growing numbers and more to do with a far more powerful variable: retention. Instead of burning out staff with merciless crunch periods, 16-hour workdays and weekend rotas, it's refreshing to meet ArenaNet staff who've worked at the company for several years and are still genuinely enthusiastic about what they do.

"There's so much that you can do with a team that has worked together for a long time, and trusts each other, and works together well," says O'Brien. "You build up this shorthand way of working together and I think it's a really powerful way to work. To do that, you've got to be willing to stand up for your team. It was very important to Jeff and Pat and to our company as a whole that we have a sustainable way of working."

Another important rationale for protecting the sanity of ArenaNet staff lies in the fundamental differences between the delivery of self-contained game experiences and persistent online worlds such as *Guild Wars'* Tyria. In a traditional model of game development, employees might be able to justify working into the ground because they can collapse once the game ships and recharge their batteries before the next project ramps up. But O'Brien points out that when you're working on an MMOG, you'll never be busier than the week *after* you ship a game. All of a sudden, millions of people are flooding into the game and ArenaNet has to make sure they're having a great experience, and adapting the game as needed to keep them excited. To ease this transition, the studio has treated *Guild Wars 2* as a live service from the very beginning of its development

The very first thing ArenaNet does is get the game multiplayer-playable and patching itself, so that anybody in the company can play the game at any time. Then everybody plays the game together ("Even before there's much game to play," O'Brien laughs). Then they simply continue to play the game, adding features and playing what they've added, tweaking as they go. They've even built software to accommodate up to a dozen builds over the course of a day.

Guild Wars 2 has been hosted in a data centre since development began 2007. "If something goes wrong in the data centre," O'Brien explains, "the problem is treated as it would be in live operations. We're on call, we're fixing the problems – we're making sure the game is operating as a live game the entire time. The worst thing would be if we didn't know how to operate *Guild Wars 2* as a live game, and were learning at the moment of release.

"So basically in everything – in game design, in our work-life balance, in the way we operate the game as if we're live today – we try to make sure we're making decisions that will make this sustainable today and for years to come." ■

Q&A



Mike O'Brien
President and co-founder, ArenaNet

One of the boldest changes *Guild Wars* brought to the MMOG landscape was the removal of a monthly subscription fee. In this area and numerous others, the studio has been trying to stretch the MMOG experience. With sales exceeding 6.5m units, players seem to be quite happy with the direction. **Mike O'Brien** tells us more.

What do you think about the current state of the MMOG genre?
In terms of design mechanics, MMOGs are kind of stuck in a rut right now. So we're trying to offer *Guild Wars 2* as a way to say: "Look, it doesn't have to be that way." We've worked hard to identify and remedy those problem areas: worlds being pretty static, not responding to what players do in them, games using the same quest mechanics, and those quest mechanics being inherently really singleplayer mechanics that cause people to resent each other instead of play together. There's so much for us as an industry to learn and experiment with, and offer players new choices and new experiences, and that's what I want to do. I hope that ArenaNet always differentiates itself that way.

How did you decide it was time to begin work on *Guild Wars 2*?
In 2007 ArenaNet had a 130-person team working on *Guild Wars* who had shipped three titles – and were about to ship a fourth *Guild Wars* title. We had an amazing veteran team that we never had back when we were 12 people at the beginning of *Guild Wars 1*. We felt like we could just set our sights as high as we wanted, essentially, to make the best online world in the industry. And so we decided that that was our future, and so that's when we decided to kick off *Guild Wars 2*. It's a strange thing to do, to announce before you start working on a game that you're going to be working on a game. It puts fans in the position of having to wait a long time, and we told them: "We're sorry you have to wait a long time, but we want to be honest with you, and this is why we're not delivering more content into *Guild Wars 1*, but working on a sequel."

What is it like competing with a game-industry titan like Blizzard?
We really are not competitors in the sense that many other industries are competitors – Apple versus Microsoft, or something like that. If you buy one of their computers, you're not buying the other one. In the game industry if you're buying one game, that doesn't mean you're not buying the other, and so generally it's in all of our interests for a lot of great games to exist that attract more gamers to the industry and get people more excited about buying more games. I really don't think of Blizzard as a competitor in that sense. Certainly, this last round of online worlds, Blizzard was number one and *Guild Wars* was number two. And I don't intend to be number two in the next round, and so in that sense they're a competitor, but we don't have to be cutthroat and not friends.





Top: ArenaNet employees can see the Seattle skyline in the distance. Above: One of the studio's artists puts the finishing touches to a new female character

THE MAKING OF…
Flower

Colourful and serene, Flower invited players into a world of tripped-out bliss. Making it involved a lot of grass…



"People who question whether *Flower* is artistic often only play the first level," says Chen. "They see a beautifully rendered grass field and say: 'Oh, it's just a tech demo'"

Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer thatgamecompany
Format PS3
Origin US
Release 2009

Videogame designer **Jenova Chen** was driving when he first noticed the grass fields. Arriving in America from the modernist steel-and-glass sprawl of Shanghai, he'd never seen anything like the verdant landscape beside the interstate highway in California. He stopped his car, grabbed his camera and started clicking. "It was like the desktop wallpaper of Windows XP," he remembers. "Green grass fields stretching to infinity. I saw a windmill farm – something I'd never seen before in my life. It was like someone seeing the ocean for the first time."

His snaps didn't do the vista justice, so he tried a 360-degree panorama. But that didn't cut it either. There was something about standing there with the wind in his face, the smell of the grass in his nostrils, that couldn't be captured in a digital photo. Back home he began painting the landscape he'd seen, using artistic exaggeration to capture the feelings it evoked. But the pictures had an unexpected result.

"I realised whenever I finished a nature painting I felt extremely lonely," he says. "That's weird, right? The experience was so happy, but after you're in the wilds for a while you feel isolated. If you grew up in a city, urban is something you're familiar with and feel safe in. A complete wildness is kind of alienating to me. You can see in my drawings there's a flower and the grass but there's always a little house in the distance or the city skyline in the background. I find those things give me peace, a sense of safety. As I was exploring, I realised how ironic that is."

Surprised by this revelation, Chen began to wonder if it was something that he could express in a game. "I thought: 'Can I create an experience that's the perfect dream that blends the urban with nature?' You're sitting in your living room, you turn on your PS3 and it becomes a portal for you to enjoy a natural world, but at the same time it brings you back to the city. That ended up becoming *Flower*."

There aren't many videogames that make you want to reference 19th-century philosopher Henry David Thoreau or iconic poet Walt Whitman when you talk about them. But then, there aren't many videogames like *Flower*. With its keen sense of the tremulous beauty of the landscape and the tension between urban living and a rural idyll, it's a remarkable achievement – a game that



Thatgamecompany's average age while making *Flower* was 22. From left: Kelee Santiago, Nicholas Clark, John Edwards, Jenova Chen, Matt Nava, Martin Middleton and Rick Nelson

celebrates nature's awe-inspiring beauty through a hi-tech, hi-def, highly abstract rendering of its textures and colours. Like Thoreau, retreating from the world to the lyrical isolation of Walden Pond, *Flower* is a game that's good for the soul: contemplative, transcendent and serene. Making it, though, was anything but.

Founded in 2006 by Chen and Kellee Santiago, graduates of the University of Southern California Interactive Media MFA programme, thatgamecompany has earned a reputation for making unconventionally tranquil games that privilege emotional tapestries over adrenaline-charged feedback loops. They're the kind of games that evoke passionate responses in players.

> "We got emails: 'Tell all the people who worked on the game that you are the most beautiful people'"

Cloud, made while Chen was still a student, set the trend. Allowing you to fly your avatar through fluffy clouds in a clear blue sky, it was simple yet somehow uplifting. "People were saying they had tears in their eyes while they were playing the game," he recalls. "We were getting crazy emails: 'Tell all the people who worked on the game that you are the most beautiful people.' No one in my life had ever said that to me before."

After *Cloud* came *Flow*, where players piloted an aquatic creature through a surreal underwater world. It caught the attention of Sony, which signed thatgamecompany for a three-game deal to make PlayStation Network titles. After *Flow* came *Flower*, and when the boutique indie game studio took the concept to Sony, the publisher could instantly see its potential, even though the gameplay was still far from locked down.

"I didn't know what the game was when we went to Sony," explains Chen. "I knew that flowers are something everyone has an emotional response to. Flowers are one of the top uploaded photos on Flickr, next to babies and weddings." It was, it has to be said, a pretty unusual proposal for a videogame.

"When we pitched it to Sony, we didn't just say: 'Hey, we're making a flower field simulation here.' I said: 'I want to create a game where the people who play this game feel like they're spreading love and positive energy to its surroundings,'" Chen explains. "Sometimes when I drive cars after playing *GTA* I feel like driving recklessly. So I thought, maybe we could make a game that would make you spread positive energy. After you finish playing it you want to do something good to the world. I was pitching it as a game about spreading peace and love."

The irony of pitching such an outré game philosophy to this huge corporate publisher wasn't lost on Chen. But to its credit, Sony instantly got the appeal of this hippie-sounding prospect. Phil Harrison, then head of SCE Worldwide Studios, was looking for innovative games that would push PS3 sales. "He really had a taste for something different," says Chen.

A prototype deal was signed, and thatgamecompany put together a demo of emerald grass fields. Lead engineer John Edwards boldly used the PlayStation 3 hardware to render 200,000 individual blades of grass. The effect was incredible to witness, convincing Sony that even if the gameplay disappointed it would work as a tech demo. "The 200,000 grass blades got us pretty far into Sony," Chen chuckles. "Nobody was asking technology to do this. Usually, grass is the background. But when you put all the computing power on grass, it looks pretty impressive. Especially on a Sony HDTV."

The air in thatgamecompany's LA offices in 2007 was filled with curses. Playing *Flower*, or at least playing the prototype games that would evolve into *Flower*, was a truly frustrating experience. You'd die, you'd get angry, you'd throw the controller across the room. It wasn't exactly the chilled-out game Chen had envisioned.

One of the earliest iterations of *Flower* asked you to blow seeds into the wind, like an interactive version of Eric Carle's famous children's book The Tiny Seed. You were tasked with guiding them to fertile soil: landing on concrete or in water would lead to sudden death.

"The problem was that every time you failed – and you would fail a couple of times – you

would curse," Chen laughs. "I started to hear 'fuck!', 'shit!' when people were playing the game. I was thinking this is definitely not what I'm looking for. Basically, the traditional idea of gameplay that provides challenge doesn't provide the feeling of serenity and relaxation [I wanted to achieve]. Getting rid of those curses took a long time."

The cursing wasn't just limited to gameplay. *Flower* was a frustrating development experience too, filled with a surprising amount of tension. Despite the game's harmonious intent of spreading peace and love, strife was endemic.

The chief sticking point for the eight-strong team was the gameplay itself. "There were a lot of arguments about what the game is," recalls Chen. "'Who is the player controlling? What is the story?' There were a lot of internal arguments and fights over that. Production-wise it was smooth but design-wise it wasn't. We went through 12 different prototypes."

Ideas were tossed around: there was talk about having the player collect colourful 'love' orbs ('too gamey,' they decided). An opening, firstperson cutscene sequence – depicting an office worker as he or she went home to dream about the countryside – was later axed and replaced with a montage of lonely city scenes without characters.

Other early versions of the game included what the team dubbed a 'firstperson thinker' in which the player was a 'mind-camera'. Influenced by his time at USC's film school, Chen wondered if it would be possible to play without an avatar. You would simply use your Sixaxis controller to move through the virtual landscape like a cinematographer with a Steadicam. "It was only interesting to me as a film student," he laments.

In many ways, the team was scrabbling around in the dark. No one had any idea how to create a gameplay experience that would stir the kind of emotions they were reaching for. Games based on the goal of raising the player's adrenaline levels are conventional and relatively easy to define. But a game about peace and love? How exactly did you define that in gameplay terms? It fostered many arguments. "[Chen] always seemed to come at game development and design from the perspective that encouraged the most debate," says composer **Vincent Diamante**, a freelance musician and long-time friend of thatgamecompany. "I found the fights with him to be some of the most rewarding discussion I've had."

Q&A



Vincent Diamante
Musician and composer

What was your starting point for *Flower's* interactive soundtrack?
Early in the project, we entered into some fierce debate over the sound that the swarm of petals the player controlled created. I suggested that it should be a part of the music, something that generated a leitmotif or a particular instrumental riff. That quickly evolved into this idea that the music swarm is the soundtrack of the world, in and of itself. I really bought into this, since I was on a big magical realism kick of Italo Calvino, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Haruki Murakami.

What did it add?
With the size and speed of this mix of different coloured petals, it seemed to be the perfect solution to make that correlated with the mix of instruments in the actual background music. This combined with the actual sounds of attaining the petals, which actually started from an abandoned approach to my master's thesis involving computer heuristics for music improvisation, to give the final *Flower* sound.

Did the dynamic sound playback system surprise you?
One time, it created a theme that was exactly like John Williams' Close Encounters Of The Third Kind. I screamed with laughter and started playing it for everyone in the office. However, the system had already started augmenting the melody to the point where they couldn't recognise the classic five-note theme as a source, so they just looked at me like I was crazy, as they were wont to do. The mad-scientist hairdo I sported at the time didn't help.

It didn't help that they were all so young, barely out of their teens. At 25, Chen was the old man of the company. "A lot of us had a lot of ego to try to make the game the right way," he admits. Chen and lead engineer John Edwards disagreed on several issues, not least of all the scale of the project.

"Having just finished *Flow*, the engineers believed that keeping the technology simple but focused was the key to small team success," recalls designer and engineer **Nicholas Clark**. "Jenova had just returned from working on *Spore* and had tons of big ideas he wanted to see in *Flower*. These two goals clashed, and Jenova and John spent many months arguing over which features we should prioritise in development." From discord, though, ultimately came harmony as fortune smiled on the 13th iteration of the game. After 18 months of sowing their seeds, it took just six quick months for *Flower* to blossom.

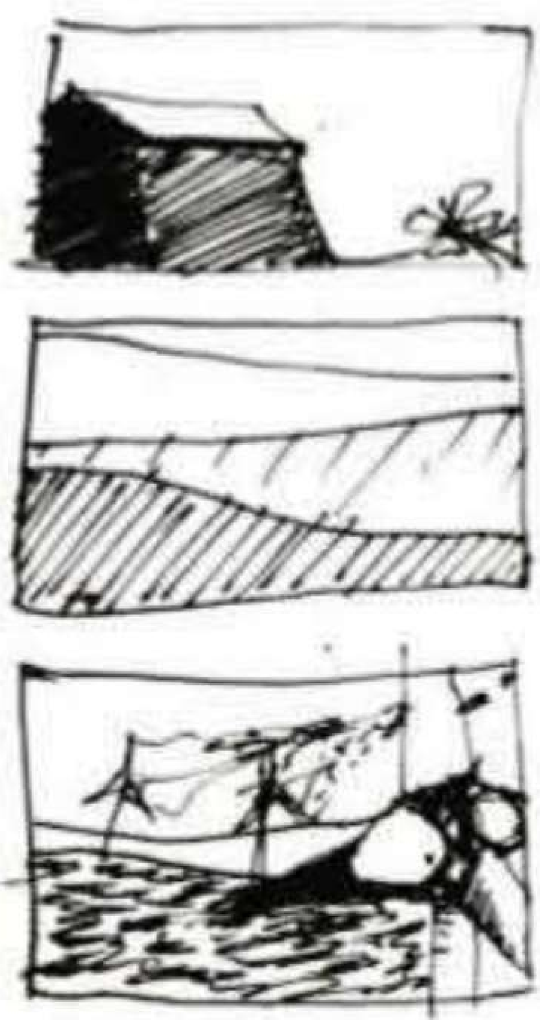
Flower is all about discovering a Zen-like sense of balance. Blowing a petal across grass fields and towards a distant city, it creates an incredible emotional undertow from a series of simple juxtapositions: the rural and the urban, motion and stillness, light and dark.

Using the Sixaxis controller's motion control and just a single button, players fly across the landscape and rejuvenate it in a series of unexpected ways as Diamante's rapturous, interactive score hints at a magical sense of endless possibility. Like *Cloud*, it's a game about flight. Like *Flow*, it's a game about evolution. But it's also its own game with a unique subtext that asks players to find a balance between rural longing and urban living – exactly the tension that Chen first discovered in that Californian field.

With its breathtaking beauty and bold colours, *Flower* is like an interactive version of Chen's paintings. Ironic then that it should become the focus of a bitter battle over whether or not games are an artform. When influential Chicago Sun-Times film critic Roger Ebert offhandedly decreed that games could never be art back in 2005, he clearly had no idea that he was kicking a hornet's nest. The debate raged on over several years and when Ebert responded to a talk by thatgamecompany's co-founder Kellee Santiago, entitled 'Are Videogames Art?', *Flower* was dragged into the spotlight.

A year on from sending Ebert PS3 hardware with which he could play the game, Chen is reluctant to revisit past history. "We love Roger Ebert for what he does," he says diplomatically. No doubt Ebert's invective helped boost *Flower*'s sales but, in truth, the title needed little help: it became a bestseller on its PlayStation Network release in February 2009.

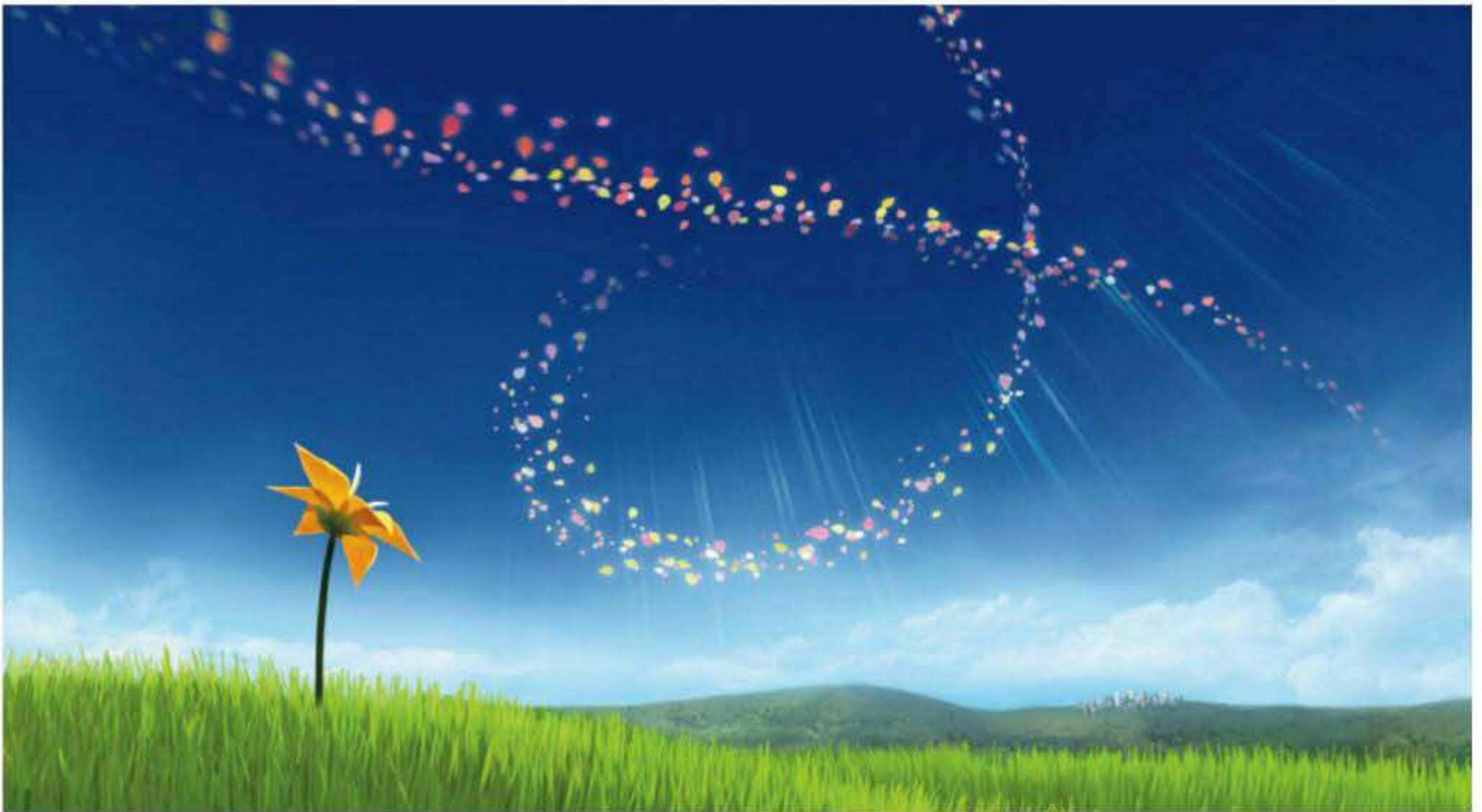
If the definition of 'art' is a work that stirs an emotional response in its audience, then *Flower* certainly achieves that. "We got hundreds of emails," says Chen. "A lot of very personal stories from people playing the game. One said he cried because it reminded him of when he was young and would go to his grandma's house where they had a flower garden. His grandma asked him: 'Have you ever imagined if we were like a butterfly and could fly through the flower fields?' He was laughing because playing *Flower* had reminded him of this conversation, and now he could see the beauty of what she meant." ■







Early concept art tried to capture his experience of standing in a California grass field. Unnerved by the rural loneliness, city dweller Chen found himself painting in huts, and later even cities



Play with feeling

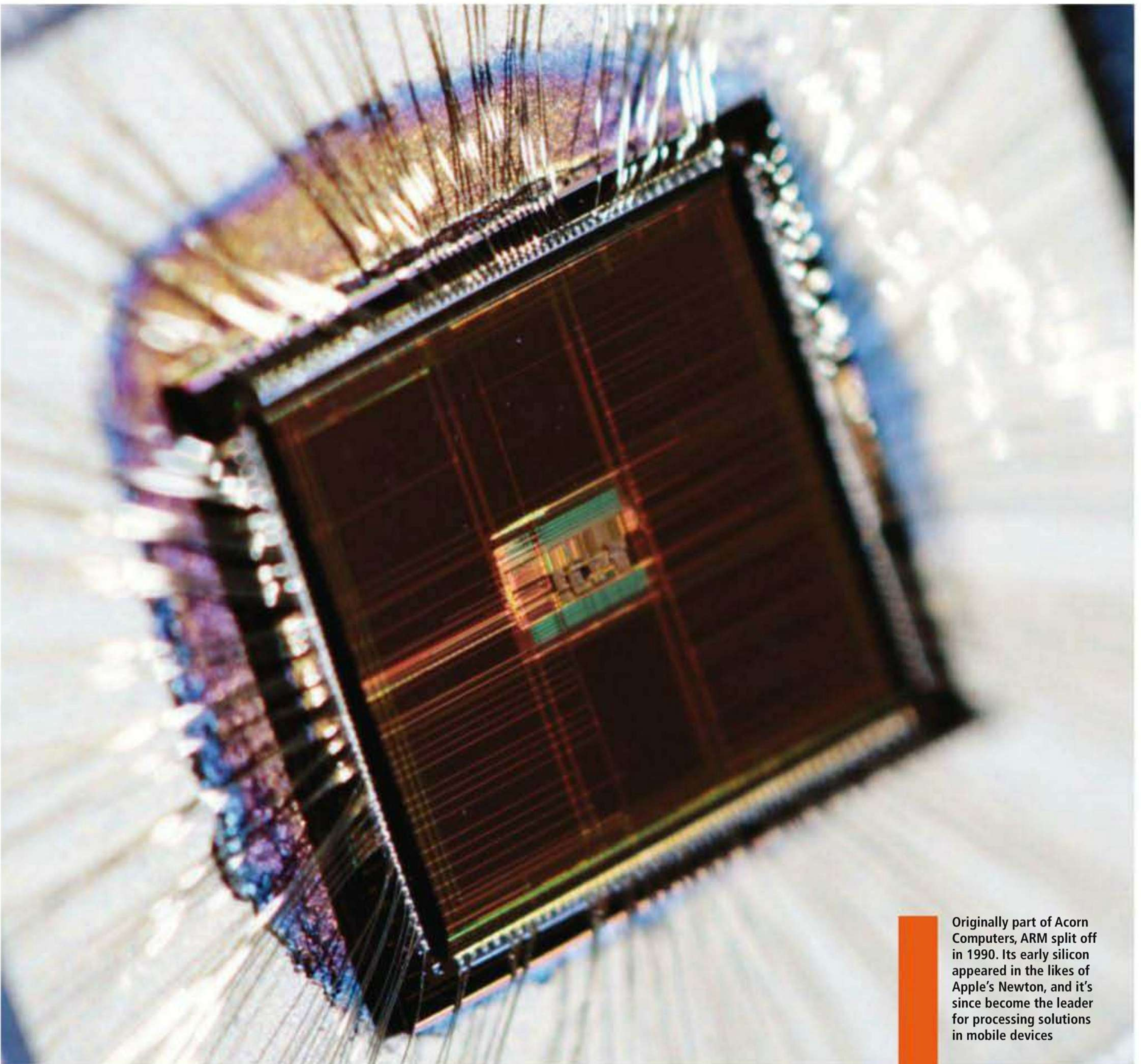
Contrary to its name, thatgamecompany wants to be more than just another developer. "Entertainment is all about satisfying people's feelings," says Chen. "Established entertainment mediums like movies and music have covered pretty much the full spectrum of humans' emotional needs. Games are not there yet. Look at most games – they're the equivalent of a Hollywood blockbuster action film, a horror or war film. Very rarely do you see the equivalent of a rom-com or documentary in games." By focusing on innovative gameplay mechanics and designs that seek to evoke an emotional response from players, Chen hopes to widen the scope of the medium's ambitions and appeal to the part of the emotional spectrum games traditionally neglect. "Every single game we have made that introduced a new feeling always attracted a new audience," he says. "People who rarely play games want to play our games."



What are you in *Flower*? The wind? A petal? A housebound flower's daydream? The lack of a clearly defined avatar is a bold choice

ARM's way

Having seen its technology revolutionise the portable market, a low-profile UK company is coming for the broader game industry…



Originally part of Acorn Computers, ARM split off in 1990. Its early silicon appeared in the likes of Apple's Newton, and it's since become the leader for processing solutions in mobile devices

Through the rise of casual and then social gaming, the slow demise of the traditional retail model, and the explosion of the high-end smartphone market, the videogame industry is in a state of flux. Which company, then, is the dominant force right now? Is it Nintendo? Apple? Activision? Zynga? In fact, it might be none of them. Arguably, it is a company set up in 1990 in Cambridge, a company that many consumers have never heard of. Its chip designs are in Apple's iPhone, most Android handsets, Nintendo's 3DS and Sony's upcoming PlayStation Vita. It is ARM – and it has plans for the future of gaming.

Sitting with a group of lead engineers in a meeting room at the company's sprawling campus-like HQ, the topic of discussion is Vita. The latest handheld from Sony packs in a quad-core Cortex-A9 design, ARM's current-generation product, a blisteringly fast CPU offering 2.50 DMIPS/MHz per core (ARM claims to have tech demos running at up to 2GHz, putting it in line with current desktop systems). A key feature is the chipset's NEON media engine, a 128bit SIMD architecture, designed to accelerate multimedia operations – and run the physics engines required by console-quality titles. "Game developers will get the best out of this platform," says **Lance Howarth**, general manager of ARM's media processing division. "It's going to be a massive leap on in terms of technology."

"You're looking at 400 million units over the next couple of years – that's a huge market"

The use of a quad-core setup is intriguing. The Cortex-A9 is also in devices like the Motorola Xoom, RIM PlayBook and Galaxy Tab II, but they've all gone for a dual-core setup. Howarth believes that Sony may – at last – be thinking about practicalities rather than simply sheer processing oomph. "There are power management techniques called dynamic frequency and voltage scaling. It might actually be more power efficient to run quad-core at a lower speed than dual core at a higher speed," he says. It is, perhaps, an example of how the traditional game industry is coming round to ARM's way of thinking. Low power is in this company's very DNA.

And Sony's not the only company sitting up and taking notice. The massive graphics processing power of ARM's system-on-a-chip (SoC) points to a self-evident truth: that the gaming and smartphone industries are becoming inextricably entwined and mutually dependent. "Apple has changed consumer expectations about the user experience from these devices," Howarth says. "GPU technology – and, through that, gaming – is increasing in importance dramatically. What differentiates iPhone and Android from the Java handsets of six years ago is the number of apps and the ease of downloading them. The vast majority of those apps are games." Over in the tablet sector, a recent survey found that 84 per cent are using their devices for game use. As we've seen in the desktop chipset industry, it's gaming that now drives the tech forward.

No wonder mainstream developers are ramping up their support for high-end handsets. As we've seen from EA Mobile and Epic, mobile gaming is no longer simply about quick and trashy miniature knockoffs to exploit successful gaming brands: the power is there – as is a massive new market – to ensure that smartphones are becoming a key part of the multiplatform development agenda. "Companies like Epic and id are planning in the mobile SKUs of their games alongside the console versions," says technical marketing manager **Ed Plowman**, a veteran game industry engineer who has worked at Argonaut. "The stuff we're being shown behind closed doors suggests that publishers have much bigger plans for mobile. The tipping point between the two markets – traditional under-the-TV console and handheld – is the tablet. You've got enough resolution there, enough fidelity in the screen, to drive high-quality graphics and a decent gameplay experience."

"And there are manufacturers in the far east bringing out tablets at less than $200," adds **Jim Wallace**, a marketing director dealing with ARM's move into technologies like smart TVs. "That brings you into the massmarket space, and potentially the same volume as smartphones. So you're looking at 400 million units over the next couple of years – that's a huge market."

To illustrate where this tech is going, demo solutions manager **Anand Patel** powers up a Samsung Galaxy S II. The device is connected to an LCD TV via micro HDMI (a feature supported in several other high-end handsets from the likes of LG and Motorola) and it's running a space-shooter demo, complete with various high-end lighting and shading effects – at 1080p. As a final flourish, Patel hits a button, and puts the demo into its stereoscopic 3D mode. Admittedly, the game is chugging slightly at

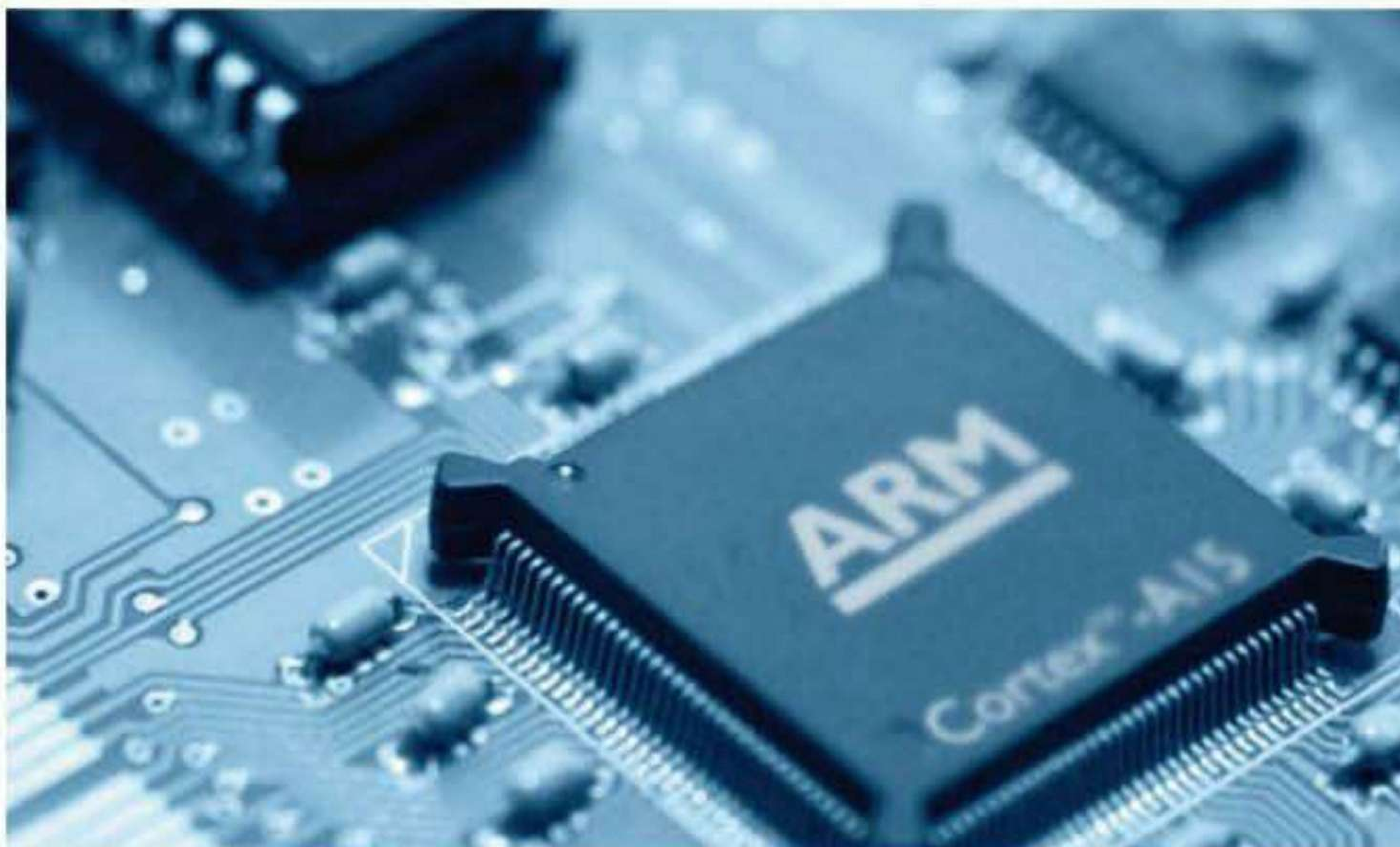
Smart gadgets

ARM sees a future in which a matrix of highly connected 'smart' gadgets dominate our entertainment time. The first step will be gaming television sets. "High-end smart TVs are incorporating Cortex-A9 CPUs, as well as multiple Mali [ARM's GPU line] devices, so you now have the underlying hardware," says Wallace. "We've also got the integration of cameras, so we're seeing the beginnings of gesture control. A lot of TV manufacturers have looked at Kinect and thought to themselves: 'Well, how do we build that in?' Two Chinese set manufacturers – Skyworth and Hisense – have ARM-powered TVs on the market. They run the Android OS and feature app stores for owners to download games from."

According to Wallace, set-top manufacturers are also getting in on the action. "I was walking around the CCBN show in China, and Coship were showing off their new smart set-top box which offers Android-based games with a remote control to play them with. They're not at the console quality, but they're good enough. There was also a whole range of TVs running basic games. We're getting to the point where people will be asking: 'Do I really need a console?'"



This Cortex-A9 tech demo, running at 1080p, features a high-poly model powered by a skeletal animation system



The Cortex-A15 is ARM's next-gen technology, currently being implemented in high-end chipsets like Texas Instruments' OMAP 5

20fps, but Patel says the tech can handle 60fps, it's just that this demo was written for ARM in just three months by a group of four Norwegian students working as interns. "That's also using typical mobile phone memory," Howarth adds. "We're not running the latest 128bit DDR that you'll find in a console – we have to deliver that performance in something with very little memory bandwidth. And typically that SoC has to operate at the maximum of 1.5 watts. A top-end Nvidia card runs at 300 watts."

But this isn't just about driving a 1080p TV with your phone, it's about the emergence of a new gaming ecosystem. One possibility that Plowman foresees is a new form of home network in which smart TVs, tablets and phones are able to seamlessly share HD content. "People talk about the cloud, but there's a concept of localised clouding that I refer to as 'the mesh', which involves devices that are much more aware of the capabilities of each other. So I may have a tablet, which I use for input and viewing, but if I want to I can push the content to another device, in much the same way as Apple's Airplay. That interaction between devices is probably how it will go."

So in the living room of the future, you may be playing a game on your TV using a tablet as the controller, but when someone wants to watch a programme, you simply transfer your content to the small display in front of you and carry on. Or perhaps the TV will tell your tablet that the programme about to start has an accompanying online game. "I was speaking to NDS, who are very strong in the set-top box business," says Wallace. "Their products know what you're watching. You can bring gaming into that – if you're watching Who Wants To Be A Millionaire, they can link your tablet to a WWTBAM game. That technology is here today – it's just a case of rolling it out and working with operators."

And on top of this symbiosis between mobile device and TV, there's the advantage of portability. "The paradigm change that's happening is, people want to take their content with them," says **Ian Smythe**, director of marketing in the media processing division. "They want to be able to enjoy high-performance gaming no matter where they are. And it's easier to lug around a tablet PC than it is a PS3."

Where does all this leave PlayStations, Xboxes and Wiis? After all, mobile devices aren't just catching up in terms of visuals, they're exploring similar input methodologies. "All the devices now have cameras," points out Plowman. "So you have AR, gesture recognition, voice control – there's enough capability in these devices to bring this stuff in. In the discussions we're having with mainstream games developers, that's where they're heading."

ARM reckons that, with 300 million smartphones in circulation, what the console manufacturers need to do now is embrace the new era of portable devices. "Look at it logically, they must see what we're seeing, that mobile phones are the volume market," says Wallace. "You can imagine that they're looking at addressing this with a range of SoCs." Plowman agrees: "Sony is already diversifying its content deployment via the Sony Ericsson handsets, and you can see the direction it's going in with this PS-certified software. They are very aware of what they need to do."

There will be consoles in this new mobile era, but they possibly won't be chunky machines with whirring fans. Last year, Epic's Mark Rein prophesied that the next Xbox would be a tablet – and that's something ARM would agree with. And, of course, when hardware providers are thinking about their next machines, ARM wants to be in there on the motherboards. Howarth says the company wasn't pushing its CPU technology aggressively enough for the current console generation, but things have changed. "Now we're in a very different league in terms of our multicore approach and our GPU technology. Quite clearly, there are some very high-profile console sockets that we're going after. We certainly don't want Intel securing them. And all those elements of our heritage – low power, high performance – they're equally applicable to these machines. When you talk to Sony, they don't want to put fans in a device in your living room – people don't want to hear a fan."

> "There are some very high-profile console sockets we're after. We don't want Intel securing them"

ARM, co-founded by engineers from the legendary Acorn (the company behind the BBC Micro), now has 1,889 staff worldwide, including design teams in Texas and Bangalore. It has a catchphrase, 'The Architecture for a Digital World', which sounds like it should be the corporate mantra of Cyberdyne Systems. But at the same time, the company doesn't appear to have lost touch with its humble beginnings. Nine of the original team are still here – a group of engineers tinkering away with bleeding-edge technology, running a solid, sensible business.

In the background, Intel is fighting back with the new Atom Z670 processor, a low-power chip designed to compete in the tablet space. But ARM's rise seems irresistible. In January, Microsoft announced that Windows 8 would support ARM architectures as well as Intel-based chipsets – a major coup. "Frankly it's Intel and ARM; all the other architectures will fall away," Howarth says. "They just don't have enough scale to drive innovation forward. And quite clearly we want the ARM architecture to go *everywhere*." ■


Anand Patel
Demo solutions manager, ARM

Ian Smythe
Director of marketing, ARM Media Processing

Lance Howarth
General manager, ARM Media Processing

1 Acorn Archimedes (1987)
This powerful but commercially unsuccessful desktop PC from the maker of the BBC Micro saw the first widescale use of an ARM processor, the ARM2. Several current ARM board members including the CTO, Mike Muller, and the president, Tudor Brown, worked on the Archimedes design.

2 Apple Newton (1993)
Apple's original 'personal data assistant' was powered by an ARM 610 processor. It's the only device ever to feature ARM branding: the message 'ARM powered' appears on the back. This early forerunner to Apple's iPad never found a mainstream market.

3 3DO (1993)
The CD-based console (or 'Interactive Multiplayer') pioneered by EA co-founder Trip Hawkins used a 32bit ARM 60 processor. Interestingly, 3DO shared a business model with ARM, licensing its design to other manufacturers.

4 Nokia 6110 (1997)
This hugely successful Nokia handset was the first to feature an embedded game – the seminal puzzler *Snake*. "This was also the first really successful digital handset," says Smythe. "It was where ARM really came into gaming."

5 Game Boy Advance (2001)
Employing an ARM 7 chip, the GBA offered longer battery life than previous colour handhelds. "This was an interesting design move for the company – our first dedicated gaming device," says Smythe. "We'd been talking to Nintendo at least five years before the GBA came into existence," adds Plowman. "We'd done several prototypes, just to show it was possible."











Essential ARM

Ten landmark devices powered by ARM











6 Nintendo DS (2004)
"The DS has two ARM processors in it, an ARM 9 and an ARM 7, the latter used mostly for backwards compatibility with the GBA," explains Smythe. "When they moved to the DSi they had to switch to two ARM 9s to support the larger screens and Internet connectivity."

7 Apple iPhone (2007)
The original Apple smartphone, based on the ARM 11 CPU, revolutionalised the high-end mobile device market, providing an unfragmented userbase and workable digital shopfront for game developers. The later 3GS switched to a more powerful Cortex-A8 CPU.

8 Samsung Galaxy S (2010)
With its huge screen and broad array of features, this was widely considered to be last year's finest Android smartphone. At its core, the Galaxy S has an ARM Cortex-A8, the same CPU as the Galaxy Tab, one of the leading Android tablets on the market.

9 Nintendo 3DS (2011)
The glasses-free 3D console uses a twin ARM 11 setup, employing the chipset's SIMD media instructions to power the autostereoscopic visuals and augmented-reality apps. Another example of Nintendo using less-than-cutting-edge architecture to clever effect.

10 PlayStation Vita (TBC)
The forthcoming PSP successor boasts a quad-core Cortex-A9 setup for superlative processing performance. But watch out also for Nvidia's Kal-El chipset, which marries a quad-core A9 setup to a 12-core GPU, promising to push out 2560x1600 'Extreme HD' visuals.

What Games Are



TADHG KELLY

Games are not a storytelling medium, no matter what people say

I'm discussing *LA Noire* with an industry friend. I say I find it simplistic, unfair and like playing Deal Or No Deal. There's no strategy. My companion says he thinks it represents a step forward for storytelling, and that my cynicism perhaps indicates that it's so good that it's beyond most players.

This makes me pause for a moment. I ask what he means and he says it plainly: gamers are not good enough for a game such as this. They don't get it.

LA Noire is the latest in the 'Games Are the Future of Stories' conversation, a marketing story which encompasses much flaky conventional wisdom about the extension of narrative. The story supposes that the player is a hero, that he is engaged in a tale of his own making, and that because the experience is interactive it is better than linear stories (which are characterised as passive).

Watching previews, you would think *LA Noire* had crossed a gulf, that the grand synergy of elements had created something transformational. Then you actually come to play the game, and what do you find?

Quite clearly it's a *Grand Theft Auto* driving simulator without the cop chases. It has a conversation engine that closely mimics the movements of real TV actors (which begs the question: why not use the actual footage and save a ton of time and money?). You also find yourself vacuuming. You 'investigate' crime scenes by walking back and forth over the floor in the hope that the controller will vibrate.

In short, it's a very expensive nudging engine. It's actually about the story that Team Bondi wants to tell, and which occasionally pauses to, you know, let the player do some stuff to nudge the story along.

Is there really anything to 'get'? Is it my fault that I find myself driving around LA causing crash after crash (with no consequence), hoping that side missions that involve doing stuff will appear? That I use Intuition as frequently as possible to skip the vacuuming? That interviewing is a giant version of Guess Who, and is very easily mastered (Press 'Lie', 'Back' and then 'Doubt' over and over.) That the supposed 'noir' of the game



Players are just players. It is unrealistic to expect them to change to fit a fantasy of what the art of games should be

seems at odds with the very brightly lit game environment and the CSI levels of gore?

Or is it like the moment from Sex And The City when Miranda realises the secret to understanding men: he's just not that into to you? It's not your fault. *LA Noire* is just not that interesting.

What *is* that interesting is *Portal 2*. Why? What games like *Portal 2* realise that *LA Noire* (and many a cutscene-laden game also) doesn't is that games are not a storytelling medium. *Portal 2* is all about the player.

Games don't do storytelling well because they can't deliver the four key components of story. There is no hero. Time is in the control of the player, not the creator. There is no inevitability or sense of being powerless. And the story cannot have the player's full attention. So a videogame Hamlet is just a guy running around a castle flipping switches and collecting items to kill his uncle, the big boss at the end. All those speeches just get in the way.

The player is not treading the boards at the Old Vic. He's solving problems, taking action, creating and winning. Sometimes designers think this is just a matter of technique or technology. But it's not, it's a fundamental constraint borne of the psychology of play. It will always be so, and is why in 40 years there have never been any good game stories.

But there are many great games that give the sense of a story. Games like *Portal 2*, *Ico* and *Uncharted 2* give the impression that stuff's going on, that you're a part of it, and that it's urgent. They have great storysense. Characters may talk while you're doing stuff; things may happen; but the details, the structure, the drama?

They don't matter. Not really.

The act of playing a game is like astral projection. You go somewhere else where the rules are different and things are afoot. You push a doll around to act as your agent in the world and this empowers little old you to do stuff.

Whether simulation, abstract, real or fantastical, that's the basis of the art of games. It's a visual, animated and pressure-oriented art. Players get to be a part of a world in motion. So it is the world that is artistic. Game designers are worldmakers.

Interactive stories, by contrast, are bombastic and ridiculous. Are we really at that point where we have to blame our customers for not being the right sort? Is it the players that are inadequate? Or is it our internalised sense of inferiority in the face of Hollywood?

Players are just players. It is unrealistic to expect their intrinsic psychology to change just to fit our own fantasy of what the art of games should be rather than what it actually is. That's just about us and our difficulty accepting that we already are artists changing the world. You're making places where people go to do amazing things. Why get in the way of that?

Tadhg Kelly has worked in games, from tabletop to consoles, for nearly 20 years. Visit him online at whatgamesare.com

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In The Click Of It



CLINT HOCKING

The elephants in the room (part seven): the fourth estate

A few years ago, I wrote a blog post lamenting the sorry state of game criticism at the time. The critical discussion of games back then was not much concerned with the examination of their aesthetic qualities, or with evaluation of the creative decisions that led to those aesthetics, but instead was almost exclusively constrained to discussions of what happened in the story of a game, or what its feature set included.

Almost before I could blink, however, that turned on its head. The subsequent year saw a total transformation of the nature of game criticism – at least online and particularly in the blogging space – and gave rise to what I would today consider to be a healthy and vibrant (though still very young) culture of game criticism.

Over the past several months, with this series of articles, I have turned my attention away from the criticism of games and of game design, and have instead been examining the game industry itself. I have been trying to take the industry to task for all of the elephants that seem to be standing around in our collective living room. By our elephants, I mean those issues both so serious that they must be dealt with and also so obvious that we can only be ignoring them intentionally.

For the most part (leaving room for exception as regards my article on workplace gender imbalance), I feel I have failed in that task. With each new month, as I sit down to write about each now topic on my hit-list of 'things the game industry needs to do better', I slowly find myself rationalising away the heart of my criticism. Of course, I was trying to be discerning, even-handed and fair in my analysis, and it is certainly true that in most cases my first blush appraisal of the industry's failings was overly simplistic. But in striving to elevate simple-minded finger-waving to the level of rigorous examination, I often ended up rationalising away the very real problem of the three-ton pachyderm that was standing in the living room.

They say that a simple thing is something whose complexities you are ignoring, and perhaps that was true of my initial stance on issues like the industry's approach to the annualisation of sequels, or on the limits of freedom of information, but in justifying the industry's stance on these issues (which is at least as simplistic as my own) by saying 'it's complicated', I feel like I have been at once misrepresenting myself and, at the same time, doing someone else's job for them. And that sucks. And I apologise.

By way of salvaging something out of all of this, though, I hope this acknowledgement points a big finger at the real elephant that has been standing in the room of this series of columns from the very beginning, and that is that, as a member of the very industry I am trying to criticise, I lack both the perspective and the credibility to do it correctly. And I suppose the real question that falls out of all of this is: 'Who should be writing these columns?'



It's sad that we must rely on whistle-blowers to air the industry's dirty laundry with a massive and shocking reveal

Last year, following a piece in Rolling Stone magazine, US army general Stanley McChrystal was forced to resign his command following remarks he made that seemed to imply he was challenging presidential authority. In response to criticism of the article itself, the author, Michael Hastings, defended his piece by saying: "Reporting is what someone, somewhere doesn't want known. Everything else is advertising."

So to answer my own question, the people who should be writing articles that take the industry to task for its many elephants are not developers like me, but rather reporters working for the gaming press. Just as a few years ago the state of game criticism was in a relatively sorry state and the bloggers and game culture writers stepped up to fill in that gap, the time has come, I think, for the gaming press to stop re-reporting corporate press releases and public-domain information and start writing about the things that the industry doesn't want them to write about.

Of the hundreds of thousands of words that the gaming press generates monthly, how can there not be room for a well-researched exposé on the cultural impact of annualising a brand? How can we not have an unbiased investigative report into how industry employment contracts constrain (whether fairly or otherwise) freedom of information and freedom of workers? It's sad that we must rely on whistle-blowers like EA Spouse to air the industry's dirty laundry with a massive and shocking reveal of secrets that were never really secrets in the first place.

Over the past decade, the game industry has transformed from a fast-and-loose collection of upstarts and startups into a multibillion-dollar industry and a primary driver of technology and culture. In face of the tremendous power of such an industry, it is now more important than ever that the press begins living up to its responsibility as the so-called fourth estate – the societal institution that stands alongside our other institutions and is granted both the freedom to point to our elephants and call them out by name, and the protection to do so without fear of persecution.

Clint Hocking is a creative director at LucasArts working on an unannounced project. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com

CREATE
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The Possibility Space



RANDY SMITH

Getting back behind the wheel of Grand Theft Auto IV

Recently, I tried to replay *GTAIV*, but it felt too dated. Not the graphics, which are fine. Some of it is the controls, which are bizarrely maximal (hold A on foot to run, tap A to sprint? Hold X while driving to toggle high beams? You couldn't ship anything more elegant than that?). Mostly it is badly directed, and given its success, it would seem direction isn't a thing our medium cares much about yet.

What I mean is that the various parts of *GTAIV* don't cohere into a meaningful larger whole. The most striking example is captured by a friend's comment that "there are two Nikos: the one in the cutscenes, and the one I play." The Niko you watch is a complex character blending a dark past with a buoyant spirit, fearless loyalty to his friends, and hard-earned criminal wisdom. But the Niko you play needlessly disobeys all traffic regulations, takes preposterous risks violating the law, and commits vehicular manslaughter on an unprecedented scale. Neither of these parts is bad. I'm compelled and absorbed by both of them. I'm just saying that nothing has been done to reconcile them in the game. It's not like Niko lives in a post-apocalyptic circus of nightmare drivers. Liberty City is simulated in exceptionally sharp relief, and much like the story, the extra dimension it is given is clearly meant to reinforce the idea that it's a regular city of regular folks. So a man like Niko, with his pride and self-preservation, isn't just for the sake of cheap thrills going to act like the Insane Clown Posse in their most cracked-out dreams. And yet, that's exactly the most fun way to play the game. To embrace the reckless chaos, provoke the interacting rules, throw rocks at the hornets' nests and squeal away gleefully, get chased into the river and drown. Even if you were inclined, Mormon-like, to deny yourself the pleasure that, genitals-like, the gameplay is clearly intended to provide, you basically couldn't. 'Keeping a low profile unless necessary' isn't really supported.

Here's what I bet Rockstar was thinking when it made *GTAIV*: do the best of everything, and tons of it. Hugest amount of content, best vehicular physics, greatest voice actors. Bring in the most talented writers, animators, modellers. A dozen minigames, a million features. Each part was considered separately with an eye for maximising its entertainment value. We were so dazzled by this accomplishment we easily forgave that too little of it connected thoughtfully with the rest. Media always comes in pieces: chapters, characters, themes, game mechanics. Creative direction is the art of adding them up to something, ideally all flowing from an undeniable impetus ahead of time rather than stitched together after the fact. *GTAIV*'s achievements in direction were not creative, but maybe financial, production, or pure virtuosity. If a romantic scene has great dialogue, and the reckless driving is incredibly fun, that should be enough.



Creative direction is the art of adding the pieces up to something, ideally all flowing from an undeniable impetus

What direction would make me less whiny? Maybe craft a tone hospitable to relentless anarchy, a city where activity and life only serve as a shallow backdrop to the gameplay. Not real people going to work, just puppets walking down the street for the purpose of being hit by cars. Maybe the story is full of simpler characters consumed by greed, violence and vehicles, subjects that align well with the player's interactions. Maybe your character doesn't talk. Oh, that's *GTAIII*, a well-directed game that didn't overwhelm me with the superfluous and in which my tools were a natural fit for collaborating with the story. Whether it was the point or not, *GTAIII*'s narrow focus spawned a larger meaning: it explored the nature of social consequence by allowing us to indulge in the absence of it. It felt right, a perfectly crafted atomic entity.

The more Rockstar's games embrace human complexity, the less the *GTAIII* DNA that still lingers makes sense. You can't start with a sociopath simulator, bolt on more bells and whistles, and expect to get interactions that capture the essence of a man struggling to redefine himself in a foreign city. They might have needed to do less, not more, and they certainly needed to do different. Say, make it possible for you to drive within the speed limit and still get things done. Allow you to manipulate the flow of underworld politics with tools less degenerate than murder. Have a judicial system more credible than one that gives you a spanking and puts you back on the street.

LA Noire shows us Rockstar can build gameplay that aligns with a character-driven story. If it wasn't ready in 2008, then maybe Niko's story wasn't right for *GTAIV*, or maybe the *GTA* franchise shouldn't be about nuanced characters. Although related, this topic is different to continuity and fictional justification. Direction is the intent to mean something, a devotion to the sacredness of some idea you have, a willingness to compromise anything that lessens it. By contrast, *GTAIV* is a largely incoherent pile of top-notch entertainment chunks. Yet it carries one of the highest critical ratings of all time. I think we're going to look a little stunted until we start demonstrating that it takes more to win our esteem.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style, whose first game, Spider, is available now for iPhone and iPod Touch

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Word Play

JAMES LEACH

Making a hole in the bucket of barks

Back in 1983, when computer games were still constructed of mud and straw, people much like myself spent more time than is healthy playing *The Hobbit*. This ZX Spectrum text adventure had, like all half-decent games, bits that required smart thinking. Or the more likely approach of trying everything. These choke-points, and there were perhaps two in *The Hobbit*, are burned into my memory for one reason. "Thorin sits down and starts singing about gold." That bloody line must have cropped up a thousand times, and to this day if, say, I'm buying a medallion, I'm on a hair trigger in case the jeweller turns out to be a lazy but tuneful dwarf.

Since those heady days a never-ending stream of games have flowed, and what I recall from so many is rarely the great dialogue but the repeated, irritating lines and the jarring banter.

The trouble is that when a game is going well, and unfolding its engrossing plot with lifelike and well-acted characters, you get carried up in it and don't notice how highly acceptable it is. Great dialogue and acting doesn't draw attention to itself. That's why it's great – you simply absorb it, believe it and care about what happens next. But games are flexible. Which is another way of saying games must cater for idiots being idiots. What's the solution? Have the sidekick you're stupidly battering say the same "Get off me!" line over and over? That's not very realistic. In reality, when you repeat a cycle of bad behaviour, the victim usually modifies their response over time. Anyone who's married knows that. But is providing a long and varied list of responses, possibly even increasing in annoyed intensity the longer the abuse goes on, simply rewarding the abuser? Doing dumb things in games just to get differing replies is pretty much the same as online trolling.

The rock: the player needs to be told the same thing many times. The hard place: you don't want to use up time, memory and effort saying the same thing. The even harder place: players getting stuff wrong or being counter-productive would annoy those who have to endure it. It would soon alter the relationship between the characters, probably souring it permanently.

The answer, according to Leach's Fifth Law of Dialogue (random laws that we're not going



When you repeat bad behaviour, the victim modifies their response. Anyone who's married knows that

through in order), is to minimise the responses to mistakes or willful oafishness. What's needed is a line to state the problem – for example: "You must construct additional pylons." This gets played every time you make the error. If you hear this more than once, it's your fault. Of course, that *StarCraft* line has the advantage of being spoken by a computer character who will trot it out all day long if needs be. It's the nearest useful equivalent to a one-note error beep.

And in fact a similar approach works with people being asshats in a game. Even if you can opt to frag your platoon or hack up your guru, if the audible 'reward' isn't worth hearing, it's a sport that will soon die out. And without entering into dialogue about what's happened, there's no problem with the ongoing relationships in the game. The Sarge from *Halo*'s line "A favour. Don't kill my men" is as far as you need to go.

So, here I am, Mr Dialogue Man, talking myself out of a job. Well, no. The time for massive banks of responses, or buckets of barks as we hilariously call them, is in the meat of the gameplay. Again, *Halo* is a good example, with over 5,000 lines. As you play you're repeating similar actions, but hearing new lines all the time. So you're getting the variety when the good times are rolling, and that's when you really need it.

There can be an interesting effect at work too. Creating the buckets of barks is tough, not-much-fun toil, and if loads are required a writer would have to be more than human not to resist straying a tiny bit from the workaday. For example, you need nine 'into battle' lines. You go through "Charge!", "Attack!" and so on, and by eight or nine you sneak in "To certain death!" Once in a while, a player will hear this immediately prior to seeing his troops obliterated. This player, although clearly lacking in the tactics department, may announce on the Internet that your game 'knew' the odds and thus the certain death remark was triggered specially. Much like seeing faces in clouds, the gamer's brain has imputed a degree of brilliance to your game which isn't there. This effect works well for richly dialogued RPGs, as players expect to find clues everywhere, and every action may have long-term consequences.

So the truth is that repetition, for so long the horror of game writers and audio teams, is no bad thing when it indicates that the player is at fault. Basically, game-buying public, if you don't want to hear it, play the game properly.

The other truth is that massive variation in barks and banter is always good. Oddities or funny asides work too, but they have to be mighty rare. And when the writer completes his 5,000 lines of battle cries and smiles, knowing that there's one perfect, impossible-to-find Inglourious Basterds quote in there, he'll be told a week later that it doesn't work in French, Italian, German or Spanish, and could he replace it with another anguished howl for someone getting shot?

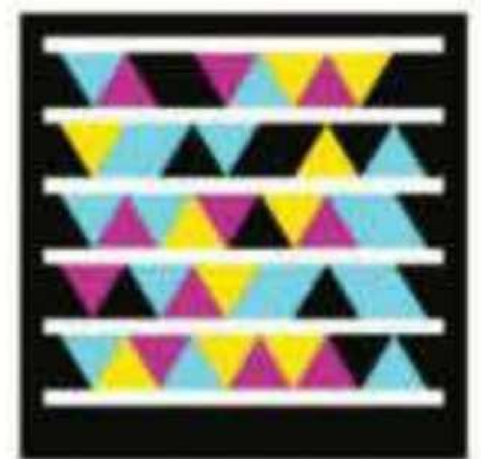
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Stand Out
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Treat



Which was the first 3D tennis game?





Pete Sampras Tennis



Virtua Tennis



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